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DRAWING DOGS

A Thesis Presented

by

DUSTIN BUCHINSKI

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ABSTRACT

DRAWING DOGS

MAY 2014

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EAST AND WEST



East and West were brothers. Practically twins, really. Nine months and two weeks after West was born Mom gave birth to East. It meant that they shared the same age for two months and got enrolled in the same grade. People assumed they were twins, but West always corrected them, making sure they knew he was the first born. He said they were right, though. They might as well have been twins. Only, Dad would say, that the government didn't want to give the family any of that twin financial support. And that the brothers never shared that connection twins are said to have. When East cut his finger, West felt nothing.

There were only the four of them: Mom, Dad, East, and West. West hated that the natural order to list he and his brother was: East and West, despite being the oldest and more deserving of the first spot. It wasn't East's fault, though. He knew that. It was their parents' for naming them. And for not being able to wait a few years before having a second son.



The family went to church every Sunday. West could never figure out why. He was pretty sure it had nothing to do with Jesus or anyone else Father Dorn read about, standing in his pulpit. West would study the large, iron chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. He imagined what would happen if the thin chains bolting them to the ceiling ever snapped. He counted how many people would be crushed under them. Usually groups of eight if the church was crowded enough.

Father Dorn would say, "Rise," and everyone in the church stood up in unison except the old and the sick of the front row. They could barely get up the once, when it was time to leave.

East stood next to West and he would dig this thumbnail into the heavy, wooden pews. He peeled curling strips of finish off and then spent a long time trying to clean it out from under his nail. Dad told him he would get an infection if he wasn't careful and that they would have to pull his thumbnails off with pliers before they went septic and killed him. It was an attempt to scare East because saying he was wrecking the pews proved not enough. Dad whispered, "Do you have any idea the chemicals they use in that finish? Me neither, but arsenic is probably one of them."

Father Dorn would say, "You may be seated," and everyone standing sat. This caused a lot of noise and for a few moments the church would fill with the sighs and grunts of its two hundred-plus congregation and the bending of the wood under their collective asses. It was at this time people who had been trying to be polite cleared their throats or coughed, or sometimes even let loose a little flatulence.

When Dad wasn't warning East about the dangers of getting finish stuck under his nail, he stared blankly ahead, zombified. West often wondered what went through his mind then. Father Dorn loved to remind people that he had grown up locally, and looked to be the same age as Dad, so perhaps Dad was remembering Father Dorn as a boy. It asked the question: What were priests like at the age of sixteen? Were they the same as East and West? Did they already know they were going to be priests, refraining from going after girls? Or did they sin like the rest of them? Dad was stuck staring at Father Dorn's toupee, or the ornate altarpiece behind it.

Father Dorn would say, "Please kneel," and all the kneelers echoed against the marble floor no matter how slowly and carefully they tried to lower them.

Mom seemed to get the most out of church. West thought so. She was the one that dragged them there every weekend. She liked to look up at the stained glass windows. The artist had not been afraid of color, depicting the saints wearing orange and pink robes standing in emerald fields. West imagined that she used the time to go over every decision she had ever made, especially her regrets. Church was the one place where you could sit completely still, never making a sound, without anyone asking you, "why?" or, "what's wrong?" Maybe that's what it was about. Maybe no one was listening to the priest.



It was on a Sunday, after mass, when Mom told everyone that she was running out to the store. They were all still wearing their church clothes: Mom in a pinkish dress, Dad and the two boys in khaki's, a tucked in shirt, and combed hair. East and West were both sixteen. West had his license and a beaten-up Saturn that he knew he would soon have to share. Dad watched football pregame shows.

As the day went on, Dad said, "Where did your mother say she was going?"

"I don't know," West said.

They tried calling her cell a few times, each going straight to voicemail.

"How long until we can call the cops?" East said.

"We don't need to call the cops," Dad said.

After the sun went down and Mom never returned for supper, West went through the phonebook and read the numbers for the three local hospitals to Dad. He tried each one and none reported having a patient by her name.

“Now do we call the cops?” East said.

“I guess,” Dad said and dialed the phone once more.



Mom had not been killed or abducted. She simply left her family. She drove away, changed her name, and transferred jobs. She sent Dad divorce papers through the mail with a PO Box return address and she disconnected her phone. No one knew exactly where she was.

“What did you do to her?” West said.

“What did I do to her?” Dad said.

“You must have done something. She wouldn’t have left if you hadn’t done something to make her go.”

If West could have chosen, he would have left with Mom. When most families went through a divorce, the kids got to choose which parent they lived with, he thought. Why couldn’t he choose? Why was he forced to stay with Dad?

“What did you do?” West screamed.

“She didn’t just run away from me. She ran away from all of us,” Dad said.

East stayed on the outskirts of these fights, looking on. West slammed his door shut and Dad poured a drink in the kitchen and swallowed it. They both cried separately.



After Mom had left, the family stopped going to church. They stopped eating too. Instead of being woken by Mom gently shaking his shoulder, West woke to silence and an empty stomach. East shared the bedroom with him and one Sunday morning West woke up to East creeping back into the room.

“What are you doing?” West asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Going to bed.”

“From where?”

“Nowhere. What are you doing awake so early?”

“I wish I weren’t,” West said and rolled over.

He only caught East sneaking to church once more, but figured it was a weekly thing.



“What are you doing?” East asked.

Dad carried two garbage bags at a time from his bedroom, out the front door. He had broken a sweat and lost his breath.

“Getting rid of some things,” he said.

“Those are Mom’s clothes, aren’t they?”

“No. Not just her clothes.”

Dad swung the bags from his hip and piled them on top of one another by the driveway.

“Does West know you’re doing this?”

Dad gave East a look and went back for another load. “This is what’s best for him, whether he can see it or not.”

“What if she wants some of this stuff back?”

“She’s had three months to come get it. Clearly, none of it matters to her.”

West worked after school and didn’t get home until after the garbage truck had come. He threw his keys on the dining room table and quickly moved through the house.

“I ordered a pizza,” East said when he passed by. “Should be here in ten.”

West went to the bathroom and took a shower. He reached for one of the monogrammed towels and found the rack empty. He opened the linen closet behind the bathroom door and found nothing but two old, discolored towels.

“What the hell happened to all the towels?” he yelled.

The shelf below that held Mom’s makeup case was empty. West went under the sink and found that empty as well. Mom’s shampoos and bath salts and her hair straightener were all missing.

“What the hell?” he said.

He quickly dried himself and went into Dad’s bedroom and opened the closets and the drawers and the trunk at the foot of the bed that once held her cache of sweaters.

“East,” he yelled.

“Dad’s not home.”

“Where the fuck is he?” West said, stomping into the living room.

“He went out.”

“Have you seen what he did?”

“Yeah.”

“You were here when he did it, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“And you did nothing to stop him?”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Something. Anything. I don’t know.”

“It’s useless junk,” East said. “It’s not like she’s coming back for it.”

“That’s not the goddamn point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“It wasn’t his to throw away. If Mom doesn’t want it, then it’s ours. Not just his.

We have every right to it that he does. She was our fucking mother.”

Dad came home late and West nearly threw him on the ground. East stopped him.

“He’s drunk for Christ’s sake.”

“He’s always fucking drunk,” West said. “It’s pathetic. I don’t even blame her for leaving. You hear me?” he said in Dad’s ear. “I would have left you too.”

Dad swayed and passed out onto the couch. East rolled him onto his stomach with his face hanging off the cushion. He got the large sauce pan and placed it beneath Dad’s face in case he got sick. West watched him. He tried to understand how his brother could feel sorry for the man, how he could stand his smell to get close enough to drape a blanket over him. He couldn’t. He decided he would leave them too.



Dad came home one day with blood covering his face.

“Jesus,” East said when he came through the door. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I found your mother,” he said, holding the bridge of his nose.

West shot up from the couch. “What? You found her?”

“I think my nose might be broken,” he said.

East led Dad into the bathroom and West followed close behind. East knocked down the cover on the toilet and sat Dad down on it. He sat on the edge of the tub and West stood by the door with his arms across his chest.

“Okay,” East said. “Let me see.”

Dad let go of his nose and East tried to look up his nostrils, but blood clogged them and flowed out.

“Pinch and tilt your head back.”

“Where did you see her?” West said.

“In a minute,” East said. “First, grab the ice and some paper towels.”

“Is it broken?” Dad asked.

“I can’t tell. Can you breathe out of it?”

Air wheezed from deep within and a bubble of sticky blood inflated. “Not really,” he said. He lowered his head and red drips fell onto the toilet seat between his legs.

“Keep your head back and pinch. Does it hurt when you pinch?”

“Kind of.”

West came back with the ice tray and a roll of paper towels. He cracked the ice tray over the corner of the sink and wrapped a few cubes in paper towel.

“Put this on it,” he said.

Dad pressed the ice against the side of his nose. The paper towel quickly became wet and then turned pink with blood.

“What happened?” East asked.

“I was at the supermarket and I saw your mother. She was with another man, shopping. I was going to say something, but she saw me coming and had the motherfucker she was with sucker punch me.”

“Let go,” East said.

Dad removed the ice and blood still trickled out of one nostril.

“Jesus.”

“What?” Dad said.

“Nothing. Put the ice on the other side and tilt your head again.”

“She was at the store? In town?” West said.

“Not exactly. I’ve been doing a little snooping and found out she had moved up to North Stuart. I figured the supermarket was a good place to start looking. I guess I was right,” he said, smiling beneath his bloody nose.

“Who was the guy?”

“No idea. Some piece of shit. Who the fuck sucker punches a fifty-year old?”

It didn’t seem too farfetched for West to imagine. He didn’t like the idea of Mom’s new boyfriend being to one to do it, though. He didn’t like the idea of Mom’s new boyfriend at all.

“Did she say anything?”

“Nothing I could hear. She just pointed at me and whispered something into the guy’s ear and then wham-o.”

“All right,” East said. “I think it’s stopped. West, grab the Band-Aids.”

East stood Dad up to his feet and helped him out of his bloody shirt. He turned on the tap and Dad lowered his face into the water. He used paper towels to scrub the blood

away. Droplets fell onto the sink and stuck there for a moment despite the water sloshing over them. Dad took his face from the water and dried it off with another paper towel. East used his thumbnail to scratch the crusted blood from the creases around his nose and mouth.

“I feel like I need to blow my nose,” Dad said.

“If you do it’ll start bleeding all over again.”

“It’s all down my throat.”

“Band-Aid,” East said.

West peeled the paper off the Band-Aid and handed it to East who delicately placed it over the bridge of Dad’s nose. Dad looked at himself in the mirror.

“He got me good,” he said. “That piece of shit. My eyes are already starting to swell.”

“How did she look?” West asked.

Dad looked at him through the mirror. “Better than anyone like her should,” he said.



The rain poured down outside, but West had told himself he was leaving, and he wasn’t going to let something like weather stop him. He packed a small bag with underwear and his bathroom gear. He slipped out after midnight. Dad slept on the couch with one of those gel cool packs on his chest. His face was swollen and discolored.

West drove his Saturn along Route 21, up to North Stuart. He wound through a thickly forested road that curved around Hollister Mountain. The embankments on each side grew steeper and the rain had washed streaks of mud across the pavement. West had

to slow around the curves and he saw guardrails on both sides of the road twisted and contorted from whatever car had careened into them. As he went farther north more glass glittered in his headlights on the road and a dozen animals had been flattened and scrapped off to the side. Everything from squirrel to deer was battered and bloating in the rain. Some eyes still glared orange as the headlights passed over their demented faces with exposed tongues. West had never seen anything like it, and it was then that he realized he hadn't seen a single other vehicle driving all night.

West turned around another bend and saw red flares and police lights fluttering ahead. He slowed to a stop in front of a state trooper wearing a poncho and waving a flashlight at him. West could see the accident the cruisers and flares surrounded. The front end of a truck had buckled against the warped guardrail. The windshield had shattered and sticking out of the driver's side window was the giant antlered head of a moose. The truck had hit the moose so that it rolled over the hood and smashed through the windshield and into the cabin. The moose's head hung limp and one of its antlers had splintered off. West came to a complete stop and the trooper walked over to his window.

"This road is closed," the trooper said.

"What the hell is going on here?" West said, having a hard time prying his eyes away from the moose.

"There are detour signs about fifteen miles back. I'm gonna need you to turn around."

"What's with all the animals?"

“An old mill dam crumbled apart sending a wave of water rushing down the side of the mountain,” he said. “It flooded out the animals and they came running across the road into traffic.”

“Holy shit,” West said.

The trooper turned to the moose. “We aren’t too sure what to do with this one. Can’t seem to tell where the moose ends and the driver begins in there. I’m gonna have to ask you to turn around now and head back the way you came. And drive slowly. We don’t need any more excitement for tonight.” The trooper tapped the hood of West’s car and walked back to his cruiser.

West made a three-point turn and drove for home. He took it slow and by the time he got back into town the storm clouds began to glow with the sun rising behind them. West tried to think of where he could go that wasn’t home.



The church wasn’t as full as West had remembered it. He dabbed his finger in the holy water and tapped it against his forehead. East was easy to spot. He stood like everyone else, but in the back row of a cluster of people, in a pew all to himself. After Father Dorn told everyone to sit down, West slid in beside him.

“Hey, East.”

“Hey, West.” He focused his attention on cleaning out the wood finish from beneath his thumbnail. “Mom is over there,” he whispered.

“What?” West said. He swept his eyes across the nave and saw her sitting on the other side of the aisle. He went to stand up, but East stopped him, shaking his head.

“Anywhere but here,” he whispered.

“How long?”

“Neither of us ever stopped coming.”

Mom sat, staring up at the bright saints nestled into the high walls. East went back to peeling the finish off with his thumb. West relaxed a bit to the sound of Father Dorn’s rhetoric and was surprised by how satisfied he felt when he noticed that Mom sat directly beneath one of the large, iron chandeliers. He couldn’t help himself from imagining what it would look like if the thin chain holding it up were to snap.



A PHOTO IN COLOR



People always called her so pretty. They told her to model. She went online and found an artist nearby with awards and published books. She drove her grey car past identical houses with fences separating their finely mowed lawns. The northern facing homes' long yards led down to a vast and soothed lake. She had written down his address on a torn piece of paper and kept it on top of her backpack in the passenger seat. In thick, bleeding ink, the numbers: "1 4 9" were written.

A photographer in a Red Sox cap let her into his basement where equipment stood around. Black sheets drooped from rods, creating backdrops. White, starchy sheets shrouded the floor. There were tripod lamps with their heads downturned, a ladder, and a table covered with camera lenses. Everything looked to be patiently waiting for her.

She signed a contract and the photographer gave her a robe to change into. After she got into the robe, he told her to take it off.

"Your panties too," he said.

Her body was colorless like dead men are. Her thighs didn't touch all the way, allowing for the smallest triangle of light to shine through. The photographer told her how to face the light, never touching, always about to. Unbearably close, delicate blue veins under her translucent skin could be seen.

The photographer stretched out a black sheet and kept it taut with heavy objects and told her to lie on top. He drew the blinds across the wide picture windows that looked down to the lake. He used warm lamps on her.

The flash of the camera made a blunt sound followed by a shrill electric charge.

She kept her arms in tight and her legs closed in an attempt to save some modesty.

He told her to relax. She didn't want to look at him. He reloaded his camera twice.

“Perfect,” he said again and again. “You can get dressed now.”

He gave her a check for two-hundred dollars and she left his house feeling tired.

Her skin felt hard and as lifeless as marble. She cried on her drive home and vowed never to tell anyone about it. Next time they called her so pretty and told her to model, the pale girl smiled, modestly shook her head, and silently hated them.



In the darkroom, vats of vinegary chemicals turned sheets of paper, through some intricate reaction, into photos of the pale girl. She was naked and the photographer had taken the shots with a master's eye for lighting and contrast. Shadows defined the edge of her hips and led the eye down to a bit of black trimmed hair. A spoonful of darkness filled where her neck met the collarbone when she had tried to look away.

The photographer wore his Red Sox cap backwards while sifting through the vats. He clotheslined the prints to dry. Once they were all done he turned on the lights and stepped back to see them all together. He got hard. He was a professional, but he got hard looking at the photos. He didn't get hard because of what was printed on the paper, but to the memory of taking them. He could remember her eyes turning glossy. The way she quivered a breath after each shutter cycle.



The mover wore a fabric knee brace stretched around his leg. He carried picture frames from his truck, into the art gallery. The frames were wrapped in brown paper and the

corners were protected with triangles of Styrofoam. They ranged from multiple feet tall and wide to tiny little squares. The mover was not used to doing odd jobs like this. He dedicated most of his time moving homeowners from one dull house into another. He could carry a lead-lined refrigerator single-handedly. He propped the gallery door open with his dolly and made “oop” noises when he had to squeeze by someone.

The art gallery was filled with people bustling around. The mover leaned the pictures against a wall. The people of the art gallery ignored the mover, his broad shoulders, and thick, furry forearms protruding from rolled-up sleeves. They acted as if his grey jumpsuit and leather lifting belt were perfect camouflage. He ignored them back. He thought they were all queers.

After carrying in the last picture, the mover waited by the door to get paid. An old woman with crusted mascara ordered everyone around. She held a pen knife and slashed open the brown paper, revealing the naked women beneath them. She snapped her fingers and pointed to a wall and someone took the picture and hung it there. The mover poked a hole through the paper with his thumb and saw the pale girl lying there. He noted the way her toes pointed straight down like a crucifix.

“Would someone pay him,” the mascara woman said.

A person gave the mover a fifty-dollar bill and then ran off to set up a table of hors d’oeuvres.



It was past nine o’clock by the time the photographer showed up. He wore his Red Sox cap forward and low over his eyes. Everyone clapped when he said his thank you’s into a microphone. People wore suits and things, looking at his photos that hung from the walls.

An astonished Cuban stared at a three-foot tit for almost an hour. The photos were of women, and they were all nude, and they were all black-and-white. All except the pale girl. The photographer had left her color, hardly noticeable, but if you looked close enough you could see hints of brown in her eyes and microscopic blue veins under her skin.

The photographer with the Red Sox cap spent most of his time by the pale girl photos, chatting and smiling with guests. Some were true admirers of his work, like the Cuban. Others were critics who liked to condemn his “glorified pornography” in art journals and magazines after playing sweet at the premier. A few minutes went by and he found himself glancing back at her photos, thinking about taking them. He had to adjust himself to hide his excitement, taking long sips from his vodka tonic.

The old woman with the crusted mascara interrupted him from looking at the pale girl to introduce him to the Cuban.

“I must know how much you want for that piece,” the Cuban said.

“Thirty-five hundred,” the photographer said.

The three-foot tit can now be found at the Cuban’s mansion in Miami, hanging above his oversized bed.

The mascara woman saw the photographer looking back at the pale girl. “I glanced at these unpacking. Are they new?” she said.

“Very,” the photographer said.

She lifted the glasses that had been looped around her throat with a beaded string. She turned to the photographer. He adjusted himself through his pocket. She waved the Cuban over and the two examined the photos inches from their faces. Other guests

noticed the two inspecting the wall and came to join. Soon, the whole party surrounded the pictures, whispering amongst themselves.

Sweat from the photographer's brow soaked into his Red Sox cap. He backed away from the crowd, feeling perverse. He moved to the bar, now empty, and ordered another vodka tonic. His hand shook as he gulped it down. The old woman with the crusted mascara broke from the crowd and strutted over to the photographer in the Red Sox cap.

“Those photos aren't black-and-white, are they?”

“No.”

“And the model?”

“Amateur.”

“She's absolutely perfect. They are your best work yet. Everyone is asking how much you want for them.”

The crowd crawled from the photos to join the conversation.

“They aren't for sale. Not yet.”

“Will there be more?”

He hoped so and began sliding away from the questions.

■

The photographer in the Red Sox cap tried to find another girl to photograph, but none were pale enough. They were all art students or fashion models too eager to work with him. They hurried home to brag, hoping to be shown in an exhibit or featured in a book. Others cashed their two-hundred dollar checks immediately. The pale girl wasn't a model. She never cashed her check. No one could fake her vulnerability, that purity. The

photographer needed a girl who didn't want to take off her panties, who didn't know how to say "no" when he said things like, "spread a bit farther for me." The photographer needed someone's innocence he could ruin.



SEA MONSTERS



Bulbs burst, burning themselves out loudly for those who walk beneath them. A woman shrieks when one blows over her wavy hairdo. The laughter that follows is pure, desirable. She clutches tightly the man who walks with her and slaps his lapel for laughing too. His laugh is not the same. It is not the laughter of someone safe, who, for a moment, feared she may not be. The couple percolates through the sewer pipe steam and goes on slumming it down the tenderloin. Souse watches them beside his unmarked cruiser: a detective in plain clothes, working vice for too long. He combs a hand through his greased-back hair and enters the building with the exploding bulbs. Its partially lit sign reads: FULL-BLOWN NUDES.

Strippers grind their asses into costumers and moan propositions in their ears. They talk about all the unforgettable things they could do to a body for an extra fifty. Souse navigates his way to the bar where he knows the man behind it.

“Teddy,” Souse says.

“In the back,” the bartender says.

A brunette with long, straight hair, a tall thong, and a bra with holes for the nipples to poke through asks Souse if he wants a dance. He tells her no, and she takes some offense by it. He can see it in her eyes, despite the weight of her lids. Eyes are like that, faltering, showing our cards in their reflection.

In the back room two women go at one another on a stage. One is submerged between the other’s legs and men get as close as they can to see what sort of sloppy thing is going on between them. Men, slimy with booze, drool over their faces. They are

drunken, desperate creatures with hard-ons pressing against their pants. What blood is left fills up their eyes. They wear stained clothes: freshly stained where one wipes his hands, anciently stained everywhere else. Some men wear suits or khakis but are no different. Cleaned dirt, Souse calls them. The men are mutant with lives outside that are far more normal than one would imagine, hearing them shout, "Cunt. Show me that cunt." Hearing them whisper, "I'd like to see you suck this." They all have stinging palms, and forcible thumbs, and evil teeth. They are all monsters and Souse knows them intimately.

Teddy is screaming at one of the blonde strippers in the back. "If you make 'em come off a twenty dollar lap dance then what the fuck's the point of the private rooms upstairs?" he says. "It costs seventy to come in my club. Not fucking twenty."

The blonde runs off crying like a girl scolded by her father. The others ignore her. They are deaf and blind to the whimpering of one another.

"Teddy," Souse says.

"Howdy, officer." There are always things stuck in Teddy's teeth. "Is it that time of the month again?" He laughs. "You and these bitches' menstrual cycles cost me more money..."

Teddy brings Souse into his office where enough blow has been spilt onto the carpets that one sweep of a vacuum could jumpstart a small cartel. The single redeeming quality is that its thick door offers Souse some reprieve from the pulsing music and purple neon. Teddy has the money in a manila envelope and hands it over.

"How many guys do you split that with?" Teddy asks. "I hope I'm contributing to the whole department here and not just one greedy cop."

"Detective," Souse says.

“Right. If you say so.”



Souse does not go home. He does not go back to the precinct and he does not investigate any crime. He instead drives his car up a hill to a hotel where the snow is piled up on the sidewalks and the roads are wet and reflective.

It is an old building with wooden framework throughout and a lobby with a cage elevator. The hotel was built in the 1800's as a place for whalers to find company and a bed for the night. Little has changed. Souse goes up to a room where he knows the door is unlocked for him. She is inside, drinking cheap champagne and listening to the old music Souse finds relaxing. She is wearing a sheer pink halter top and greets Souse at the door. He kisses her into the room. The plaster walls are yellowing and ornamental wood carvings surround the doors and windows. He takes cash from the manila envelope and places it in a jar on top of the vanity. She helps him take his clothes off. They rarely speak outside of bed.

“You know what I'm waiting for?” she asks.

“What's that?”

“I'm waiting for you to come in here one night, look me up and down and say: 'Bambi, you've gotten too old for me.' Then you'll walk back out that door and I'll never see you again.”

“Is that right?” he says.



Souse likes to gaze out the window of Bambi's room. It overlooks the harbor and the tenderloin behind it. Lights fixed to buoys nod out in the black water. He opens it and the

stink in the room gets sucked out and swapped with the cold stink of the ocean. It is a clean stink: preservative, refreshing. It is nothing like the sour stink of the tenderloin and how it mixes with the rotting wharf. Souse stands above all that now. He watches over it. A barge slides into the harbor, hulking and causing waves. The lights and steam of the tenderloin look like hell. Everything else is turned off.

Bambi pulls the covers to her chin and says, "It's cold."

Souse runs his hand along the windowsill, following the groves cut into the wood. They were cut there by a simple man with a hammer and chisel and hours to spend. Souse knows this. He runs his fingers along the grain.

"Close the window and come back to bed," she says.

He does.

"Tell me a story," she says.

"Which one?"

"I don't know. You used to tell the best stories."

Souse lies there, still and silent, looking at the window. In the corners of the sill are spirals. But they are not simply spirals. They are spirals with eyes, fangs, and scales. They look like snakes, but being in New England, and overlooking the ocean, Souse knows them to be sea monsters. Carved into the wood based on some whaler's tale of a serpent boiling up from the waters, trying to eat their cache of bowhead blubber. He stares at them, all four coiling and snarling. He contemplates them as he imagines the men of that time would have.

"There was once a sea monster," Souse begins.

■

“Do you know what the worst part about the snow is?” Pyke, a detective in homicide, asks. He calls Souse when he finds a dead hooker. Souse waits outside with him while he finishes a cigarette.

“No,” Souse says.

“When the plows come and muck it all up. It gets all muddy and it looks like shit. I mean literal diarrhea shit. I hate it. It’s depressing.” He stubs out the cigarette on the bottom of his shoe and tosses it away.

“Yeah,” Souse says.

The motel room rests on the outskirts of town near the interstate. Souse rarely finds himself this far inland. Men in white paper coveralls and face masks take photos of everything and try not to leave any evidence of their own. The bed is soggy with blood and a woman lies there face-down, cut-up.

“Jesus, look at that,” Pyke says.

Everyone looks.

“That TV is beautiful. You never see floor models anymore. They’re all flat-screen high-definition bullshit. If I wanted to see high-def I’d catch a fucking play.”

Souse leans over to look at the woman’s face. He takes out a pen and, with the pointed end, moves away her matted hair. X’s have been sliced into her eyes, but the rest of her face remains unhurt. “I don’t know her,” he says.

“You know what this TV tells me about this joint?”

“That it’s cheap,” one of the men in white says. He snaps a shot of where the blood had jettisoned onto the window curtains.

“That it’s homey. It has a lived-in vibe, ya know? It’s a place with real fucking furniture. It’s got weight. These are permanent indentations in this carpet.”

“Who wants to sleep in a hotel that hasn’t changed in thirty years?” asks the one in white, slinging away his camera. “That’s thirty years of people sleeping in that bed. Thirty years of sweat, skin, and goddamn ejaculate. You think this is the first death in here?”

Souse heads for the door and stops in the bathroom. “Is this clean?” he says.

“Relatively. Do you have any idea how many shits have been taken in there?” the one in white asks Souse.

“All right, asshole,” Pyke says, “you’ve ruined it. Have you gone through the bathroom yet or not?”

“It was never used.”

Souse thinks of puke. He thinks of a dead girl from the nineties’ grunge scene in the old acrylic tub, her blood filling it. He thinks of thirty-year-old cocaine trapped under the chrome rim around the sink that must be impossible to get out. Pyke swings around the bathroom door.

“Do you think you could ask around? Find out if anyone is missing a girl?”

“Sure,” Souse says. He washes his hands in hot water but it’s not enough.



Bambi was seventeen when Souse found her eleven years ago. She had just moved in on the tenderloin and Souse was still making busts back then. That night, he took all the girls in for processing, except Bambi. He showed her the hotel, let her stay there. He’d never

take her in. She has kept the same room since with a bathroom that has a warped floor and a claw foot tub. They are like talons and if polished would be stunning.

Souse lowers himself into the tub slowly. The hot water flushes his skin where it touches and he sighs because he can't help it. His feet squeak against the porcelain and he brings his hands up to wet his face.

Bambi chops up coke with a razor on the back of the toilet. She sits naked on the seat backwards, the tank like a little porcelain table. She does a line. She collects a bump onto the edge of the razor and carefully brings it over for Souse to snort.

Bambi kneels beside the tub and massages the bar of soap around in her hands. She washes Souse. She uses a clean coffee mug to dump hot water over his face. She rubs his hair out of its fixed position and he gently closes his eyes. The water turns to something like milk with all the soap and once he feels clean enough Souse stops Bambi.

“Get in,” he says.



A car hoots its pubertal horn as it pulls into a spot in front of a peepshow called Humpty Dumpty's. Marijuana smoke pours from the cab as if on fire and the four boys exit, giddily shaking. Souse leans under the marquee, finishing a cup of steamy coffee. The boys' faces are drawn back tightly, revealing cold smiles, the teeth subtly chattering. None of them wear jackets and they hurry into the building where one of them is bound to spend all his money on a girl. Souse follows them in.

There is first a video store you have to walk through to get to the Plexiglas booths where women press themselves for you. Pyke is already there, browsing the DVD covers that all have stars photoshopped over the pussies.

“*The Ugly Fuckling?*” Pyke says. “They do children’s books now?”

“There’s nothing they don’t do,” Souse says.

“Just wanted to let you know you could stop scouring the streets for that Jane Doe from the motel room. We found her.” Pyke slides the DVD back into its slot. “That is what you were doing, right?” he says. “Scouring the streets?”

“Scouring.” Souse nods. “Who was she?”

“Felicity Mayor. Nineteen. Runaway.”

“And the killer?”

“I have no idea. You feel like walking?”

“It’s what I do.”

They walk among the lurkers and tweakers. Souse peeks down alleyways and listens for cries. Pyke smokes a cigarette. Before long, they find themselves standing on the wharf, watching snow fall onto water.

Men work in gray, damp clothes. They heave fish onto piles of ice and other fish. They attach hooks through the tails of huge tuna and blue marlin so they can be conveyed into warehouses. They shout and laugh and sweat despite the weather and working around the clock. A giant carcass gets lifted off the deck of a boat by a crane and swung onto the dock. Men cleave it open with machetes and before Souse has time to look at it all that’s left is pink foam swishing back into the ocean.

“What is that?” he says, but the men are already wrapping the chunks into parcels.

“What is what?” Pyke says.

“Nothing.”

“Listen. I wanted to let you know your name has come up a lot lately, being tossed around the office.”

“Is that right?” he says.

“They say what a tight ship you’re running down here. They’re talking about moving you up. They think it’s time you come back from the sea of the dead,” Pyke says.

Souse breathes out a cloud so he can watch it. On the hill above them, lights turn on.



“There was once a sea monster,” Souse began, “that lived at the bottom of the ocean with all the other sea monsters. It was cold down there and dangerous and so very dark. The creatures there had lights on their heads that would lie to you and trick you into thinking they were anything but monsters. But below their light was always the same, jagged, evil smile. And they ate all the poor fish who didn’t know any better.

“Our sea monster was different,” Souse said. “He didn’t have a light. He didn’t try to trick anyone into thinking he was something he wasn’t. And he hated all the other sea monsters. He hated that he had to be one of them and that he was stuck down in the cold, dark water, alone with them. But one day a tiny fish swam a little too deep. She got hypnotized by all the lights and she thought maybe the lights were safe. She thought, maybe light couldn’t belong to monsters. So, she went deeper and deeper, until there was nothing around her but lights and the evil mouths grinning with beneath them. It looked like all hope was lost, that the tiny fish was sure to be devoured, but then our sea monster saw her. He was struck by the tiny fish’s beauty and innocence, so he swooped in to protect her. He fought back the other monsters and guided the tiny fish to clearer waters.

She thanked him and made him promise never to leave her side. But he was a sea monster, so he had to go back down into the dark. But every night, our sea monster found his way up to clear waters, to swim alongside his tiny fish.”

“If he’s a monster why doesn’t he just eat the tiny fish himself?” Bambi asked.

“Because if it wasn’t for the tiny fish, our sea monster would be stuck forever in the cold with the rest of them. She’s the only reason he can come up, closer to the surface.”

“But he’s still a monster?”

“Oh, yes. He will always be a monster.”



THE PLAY



Guy hung up the phone. Snow fell past the window and landed on top of Christmas lights strung around the hundreds of wreaths decorating downtown. He slid the phone onto the table near the window and looked from their eleventh floor apartment to the street. Elle sat at the edge of the couch and held a marker in her mouth like a cigar. She had a black leather riding boot pinned between her knees. She used a tattered strip of blue terrycloth to buff the toe.

“That was Bernie,” Guy said.

Elle took the marker from her mouth. “Bernie?”

“He heard about the play. He wants to get a drink to celebrate.”

“When?” Elle used the marker to color in tiny scuffs on the boot.

“Tonight. He mentioned a girlfriend he’d like us to meet.”

“But we have that thing in the morning.”

“So? We haven’t done anything to celebrate and it’d be nice to see him.”

“I just mean, we shouldn’t stay out too late.”

“He said he’d meet us at Lady Tree’s in an hour.”

She put the boot down and sighed at the clock. “Who’s the girlfriend?”

“Victoria. He said she sells flowers.”

“Like she owns a flower shop?”

“He said she sells flowers.”



Lady Tree's was the bar in the basement of Hotel Bergeron. It was an old bar that printed adverts in the paper boasting that it had been a speakeasy ninety years ago. Bernie and Victoria sat in a booth, waiting, when Guy and Elle showed up. They hugged each other and were quick to order drinks. Elle pinched Guy when Victoria opened her mouth, her voice ringing with idiotic tones.

“What's this play about?” Victoria asked.

“It's kind of complicated,” Guy said. “It's about a train.”

“A train?” Victoria honked through her nose and looked to Elle and Bernie. “Like Thomas?”

“No,” Guy laughed. “A normal train. With people in it.”

“Tell us how it starts,” Bernie said.

“All right. It opens with a bunch of men waiting at a train station. It takes place in the fifties, when men still wore hats. All these men are waiting for the train—there's like a hundred of them—and they are all wearing hats and they look identical to one another. We, the audience, wait with them for a couple minutes. They check their watches and fidget and shift their weight and we are supposed to grow impatient with them. The audience becomes part of the crowd. We're all waiting for the train to come, for something—anything—to happen.”

Bernie nodded his head and Victoria leaned over the table to make sure she didn't miss anything. Elle scanned the faces at the bar and watched a commercial on the tiny TV in the corner.

“The train pulls up and everyone gets on it and all the men sit down in the benches at the exact same time. Simultaneously they rustle open huge newspapers. It

creates this kind of grey landscape, you know. But this one guy—he’s our protagonist named Emmitt—doesn’t have a newspaper. Instead, he opens this little novel in the middle of the train car. Something with a red cover, so it really stands out and pops. And that’s how it starts.”

“It’s a play,” Victoria said.

“That’s right.”

“On a stage?”

“Of course on a stage,” Elle said.

“How are you going to fit that many men on a stage?”

“It’s not literal. We just have to give the impression. We throw twenty something extras on stage to make it look jam packed and someone behind the curtain blows a whistle and fans steam in and it all gives you the impression that a train has just arrived at a crowded station.”

“I see.”

“It sounds great,” Bernie said. “Let’s have a toast. To my best friend, for selling his first goddamn play. Like Sam Shepard. To my best goddamn friend.”

Guy said, “It’s nothing too crazy.”

“But you’re getting paid. It’s official. It’s your job now.”

“I guess so,” Guy said.

They raised their glasses and chimed them together. Bernie drank his gin like a marooned man. Elle placed her hand on Guy’s knee when she thought he was keeping up too closely. Guy pinched her knuckle lightly, smiled, and leaned in to land a kiss beneath her ear.

“Just let me have a little fun for once,” he whispered.



The radiator spat and rattled under their table. Bernie kept ordering the rounds and everyone got tight.

“Remember how we used to sit at the bar and write poetry together,” Bernie said.

Guy laughed and nodded. “The Tap Room. That one bartender always gave us paper and told us to write her something.”

“What was her name?” Bernie asked.

“Jesus, I have no clue. I don’t think she ever told us.”

“She must have told us. We were in there every week.”

“What would you write?” Victoria asked.

“Stupid shit,” Guy said. “Nonsense.”

“Nonsense? What are you talking about? We were good. She loved it.”

“She was a bartender,” Elle said. “They’re like strippers. They act like they’re in love until you give them a tip.”

“Easy, Elle.”

“Come on, I’m just having a little fun,” she said and squeezed Guy’s leg, her nails digging in a little.

“Tell me one of your poems,” Victoria said. “Bernie never talks about writing with me. I want to hear something.”

“Do you remember any?” Bernie asked.

Guy shook his head and groaned. “Wasn’t there one with helicopters?”

“It was about a man who escaped a mental hospital and the helicopters searched for him in people’s backyards,” Bernie said.

“That’s right.”

“His name was Kovacs.”

Guy laughed. “You remember it.”

“Tell it to me,” Victoria said.

“No. I can’t think of how it goes,” Bernie said.

“Sure you can,” Elle said.

“Let’s come up with a new one. Right here. Anyone have a pen and paper? Elle, give me that flip pad you keep in your purse,” Guy said.

“I don’t have it.”

“You always have it.”

Guy stuck his hand into Elle’s purse and found the pad and waved it at her.

“Don’t,” she said and reached for it.

“We only need one page,” he said.

Guy opened it with a flick of his wrist and blindly flipped through dozens of pages filled with Elle’s handwriting. He found the first blank page and set the pad down.

Elle relaxed back into the booth.

Victoria handed Bernie a button pen that read: Dr. Jehovah Maraire, OBGYN.

“Your gynecologist is named Jehovah?” Bernie said.

“He’s great. A real nice guy,” Victoria said.

Elle shook her head and plopped it into her hand.

“I’ll start,” Guy said.

They slid the pad back and forth, writing a line each turn. Sometimes they took a few minutes to think, sipping their drinks. Elle finished off her second poorly mixed martini. Bernie held the pad close to his face and moved his lips silently as he read it.

“Out loud,” Victoria said.

“It isn’t very good,” Guy admitted.

Bernie looked at him over the pad, tore the page out, and crumbled it up. “You’re right,” he said. “It’s shit.”

Victoria sighed. “What a waste of time.”

“You know, Elle was a writer too,” Guy said.

“Really?”

“Was,” Elle repeated. “Once upon a time, apparently.”



“You sure you don’t want a cab?”

Bernie and Victoria fastened their coats and shared the same drunk, crooked expression. “Nah. We’ll huff it. Victoria loves when it snows in the city.”

“I do,” she said, smiling.

The couples left in opposite directions and Elle and Guy went deeper downtown to where cabs waited for people like them. They kept their hands inside their pockets, making fists to keep their fingers warm.

“I thought we weren’t staying out late,” Elle said.

“It’s fine. I’ll set alarms,” Guy said.

“Never mind,” she said, shaking her head and looking toward the tall apartments and offices with lights still on.

“What? What are you mad at now? I thought it was a fun night.”

“You were the only one having fun in there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, maybe Victoria. But I’m pretty sure she only has two settings: Off and excited and completely fucking dumbfounded.”

“Jesus, Elle.”

“Don’t look at me like that,” Elle said. “Like you just bit into something gooey.”

“You’re being pretty harsh, don’t you think? Maybe she was just nervous?”

“Nervous? Why should she be nervous? As if she was meeting some master playwright, towering above the rest of us.”

“Wow. Fuck you.”

“There’s a taxi,” Elle said, stopping at an intersection and pointing down a side street.

“Take it. I’m walking.”

“What do you mean you’re walking? There’s a taxi right there.”

“I don’t give a shit. Fuck you,” Guy said, never slowing to look.

“Fuck you,” Elle said.

The taxi idled on the side of the street with steam pumping out of the exhaust. The taillights lit the steam and flooded the street with red. Elle hurried up to it and knocked on the passenger window, bending to peer in. Inside the dimly lit cabin, the driver jerked off to porn cut-outs pasted to the inside of the visor. He jolted in his seat and covered himself and screamed, “The light is fucking off, bitch.”

Elle shot back and said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I thought you were waiting.”

She ran back to the main street, but Guy was already a block and a half away. Clouds of breath hung around his head under the streetlamps. Elle waited, giving him a larger head start.



The play premiered after New Year's on a small stage far from downtown. The curtains opened to eight men in hats standing around a crudely painted set. Almost immediately someone off stage played a cartoonish tape of a train chug-chugging into a microphone.

The play ended with a spattering of applause. Elle sat near the door. She saw Guy rise from the front row through the shuffling crowd filing through the exits. His face sagged, looking nauseas. Elle watched Guy struggle to find the second sleeve of his jacket, slowly turning after it. She moved against the flow of people to the front of the auditorium and held his jacket for him. He looked at her, slipped his arm through the sleeve, and sank back into his seat. Elle sat next to him. The actors hobbled around, pushing the sets off stage. Row by row, the houselights banged off.



ABOVE THE ANIMALS



Nick sweated it out in the streets. He walked down blocks that had their fire hydrants busted open. Kids hopped and hollered through the torrents of water, first coming out rust brown and foaming. Some kids set up a car wash and had an older boy direct the water with a trash can lid. They used laundry detergent and bubble bath, charging a couple bucks for when the ice cream man rolled by.

Nick met his girl, Trudy, and Trudy's brother in front of her building. Nick had made a deal with Trudy's brother, Tommy, weeks ago about bringing him to the zoo for his birthday. They hadn't expected the day they would go to be in the triple digits, but what the hell, they thought.

Tommy seemed to handle the heat best. It was hard to tell if he felt the sweat dripping off his nose at all. He just kept licking his lips like a dog. Trudy wore her cut-offs, their white pockets sticking out the bottom, and a loose tank top. Nick spotted her blue bra through the arm holes. He was the one really sweating. His hair a wreck from wiping away his forehead and his shirt had all these bumps and dents where he pinched it away from his skin. Nick was sixteen, same as Trudy. Tommy just turned seven.

The zoo was busy, considering. Kids and their parents ate ice cream as fast as they could while fascinating at the wildebeests' herd mentality. They marched in circles. Nick felt the ground tremble when they got close. The lions stretched out on their little plot of grass, yawning in the sun. Trudy pointed to the elephants shooting water onto their backs. Tommy could have stared at the monkeys for hours. He made faces at them and

laughed as they picked their assholes and flipped from fake tree to fake tree. Nick and Trudy stood a little away from the rest and intertwined fingers.

“Check out those poor bastards,” Nick said and Trudy smacked his arm. “Sorry,” he said, but Tommy wasn’t paying attention.

Nick brought them to the polar bears. They looked miserable. The heat forced them to stay in their pool, bobbing at the surface. An attendant opened a door camouflaged in the wall of the painted concrete iceberg. He came out with a large bucket in his hand and dumped twenty pounds of ice onto the blue concrete. He left once the polar bears slowly pulled themselves from the water. They rolled on their backs in the ice. It melted quickly and they slipped back beneath the cool water. Next door the penguin exhibit sat empty. Tommy wanted to know where they went.

“Inside, where it’s air conditioned,” Trudy guessed.

Nick slunk away from Trudy and Tommy while they watched a family of gorillas wrestle. Nick found a lone man at the giraffe exhibit. One of the giraffes sauntered up to the fence in front of the man. He had to take off his hat to look up far enough to see its face. His jaw hung open. The giraffe studied the man and Nick stole the man’s wallet from his back pocket. Nick found nothing but a fiver amid all the credit and membership cards. Nick swore, took the bill, folded it in half, and tossed the rest into the trash.

Nick came back, balancing three cones of vanilla. The three left the park and went across the street to the botanical gardens. They found a nice bench in the shade next to a bush with pink and white flowers.

“So,” Nick said, “which animal would you be?”

“A monkey,” Tommy said and jumped up. “I’d swing around by my tail and eat bugs off of everyone’s back.”

“You’d want to eat bugs?” asked Trudy.

“Yes,” Tommy said definitively. The ice cream gushed over his hand.

“I think I’d be a lion,” Nick said.

Trudy laughed.

“What?”

“A lion? You’re not a lion.”

“Of course I’m a lion.”

“You’re more like a—” She paused to think. “You’re more like an aardvark.”

“An aardvark?” Nick pushed Trudy and Tommy laughed. “I’m a tiger then.”

“A tortoise at best.”

“Or a stupid gorilla,” Tommy yelled out, laughing.

“And what are you?”

“I’m a peacock of course.” She stretched out her neck and strutted in front of the boys. They snorted and ate up their ice creams.

The sun had nearly set by the time they made it back to Trudy’s neighborhood. Some man in a uniform had shut down the open hydrant hours before, but the street was all wet still. A few kids splashed in the puddles. Trudy told her brother to go inside and that she’d be up in a minute. Tommy huffed, and reluctantly went through the door. Once he left, Nick kissed her.

Trudy said, “Meet me on the roof tonight. After ten.”

Nick nodded and kissed her again.



Nick roamed the neighborhood. He met up with a friend who was admiring the sneakers he just purchased. They called him Wax.

“Check ‘em out, man,” Wax said to Nick. The white sneakers had fat laces running all over the place.

“Where’d you get ‘em?”

“Fell off the back of a truck or something. Some guy was selling ‘em for ten bucks. They’re fucking nice, right?”

“Where?” Nick asked.

“Don’t worry about it, I got the last pair,” Wax said.

Wax skipped down the street, dodging all the puddles. Nick walked carelessly beside him. People were out and about. Wax said hey to a few kids walking in the opposite direction. A group of men loitered, smoking cigarettes on the corner. One of them told a story. All Nick heard was: “So, she’s sucking me, right? And then Digs comes in, all high and shit, and is like, ‘What the fuck?’” Everyone laughed. Another one of them flicked his cigarette butt in Nick’s direction, and Nick made sure to quickly look away.

Wax bought them two Cokes from a store and they sat on the stoop of his building. It was dark except for all the lights. Down the street someone had broken into the hatch at the trunk of a streetlamp and pulled out all the wiring. It veiled the corner in shadow and drugs were sold there.

Nick started after a long bout of silence, “If you were an animal, what would you be?”

Without skipping a beat Wax said, “A lion. King of the fucking jungle.”

“Yeah,” Nick said. “I said the same thing.”

They drank their Cokes quietly. A car pulled up to the dark spot in the street and sat there for a few minutes and drove away.

“You know what?” Wax said while watching the car. “I’d be a rhino. Nothing touches those bastards. Not even a lion would fuck with a rhino.”

Nick believed that. They had thick skin, no natural predators; except humans with huge-bored rifles. “Man,” Nick said.

“Huh?”

“If I could be any animal I’d be Man.”

Wax nodded, smiling. “That’s pretty smart,” he said, and let out one laugh. Wax drank the rest of his Coke. Nick sipped at his slowly, savoring.

A cop car turned onto the street and slowly rolled down it. The two officers frowned at the boys on the stoop as they passed. The cruiser stopped and the searchlight on the passenger side flashed on and beamed through the darkened corner. The corner was empty and the cruiser turned and the boys could hear its engine rev as it accelerated unseen. Wax threw his Coke bottle at the cruiser after it made the turn and it powdered against the yellow lines. A voice yelled out from the shadow saying: “Hey!”

Nick left Wax there. He hid his empty bottle next to the steps.



Nick’s stomach made whale songs. It cramped up on his walk to Trudy’s and he looked around for food, but it was late and everything was closed and no people were strolling around the streets. He made it to Trudy’s building and went into the alleyway beside it.

Nick had to wheel a dumpster beneath the fire escape to reach the ladder. He climbed up and tried to be as quiet as he could. The whole iron fire escape rocked slightly and squeaked under his feet, stressing the decades-old bolts. Every apartment had their windows open in the heat, so he had to be doubly sly not to get caught. He snooped around the windowsills to make sure the coast was clear and then moved quietly, taking deliberate steps that made the fire escape rattle the least. The first apartment Nick crossed with its blinds open was blue-lit by a television in the corner and an old man sat in a raggedy chair, watching it. The volume was turned way up and showed two cops gunning down a jewel thief. Nick stayed low and moved quietly from floor to floor. He stopped for a moment at the window of two people fucking under the covers. He could hear them heaving and the bed shaking and the woman on top seemed stuck to everything. She dug into the man with her hips. At the top floor Nick saw a little boy in his kitchen, standing on his tiptoes, stirring something on the stove that smelled delicious. He watched him for a little, making sure he was alone and then knocked on the window.

“Psst,” Nick whispered. “Hey, kid.”

The little boy stopped stirring and turned around.

“Hey,” Nick said and smiled and waved.

The boy looked down the hall of his apartment and then back at Nick. He waved back. He looked a little older than Tommy and wore clothes he had grown out of.

“What are you making?”

“Mandu,” the boy said.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Dumplings.”

“Do you think I could have one?” Nick asked.

The boy walked closer to the window.

“Can I have one of those dumplings? I’m starving.”

The boy shook his head. “I don’t think we have enough,” he said. “We only have one each.”

“I could pay you. I could give you a few bucks tomorrow.”

“I can’t,” the boy said.

“I’m good for it, kid. You know Trudy? She lives in this building too, one floor down. Real pretty.”

A woman’s voice shouted in another language from down the hall and the boy hurried back to the stove and began stirring.

“Maybe you’ve seen me around? My name’s Nick. You see, Trudy’s my girl. So, you know I’ll be back. I’ll have the money for you tomorrow. How about three bucks?”

“I can’t,” the boy said. “We don’t have enough. Eomma is going to get mad.”

“What else are you cooking there?”

“Kimchi?”

“How about some of that?”

The boy kept checking down the hall, nervously. He took a small bowl from the counter and put a ladleful of kimchi soup in it. Spices and scallions and a single cube of radish with a piece of cabbage stuck to it floated in the brine. He ran it over to Nick, who took the bowl in both hands.

“Thank you,” he said and poured all the contents into his mouth at once and chewed and swallowed and stuck his tongue out. “Holy sh—” Nick stopped himself. “That’s hot,” he said.

The woman shouted from the hall again and Nick handed back the bowl. “I’ll pay you back, kid,” Nick said. “I promise.” And he scampered up to the roof.

Nick could see all the way to the bridges from there, standing above hundreds of antennaed rooftops. Nick felt a movement in the air that he could not feel in the streets and he took his shirt off and waved it so that it snapped like a whip in the air. He hung his shirt from a TV antenna, hoping it would dry and not stink too badly.

Sirens whooped through the city below him, lighting side streets and moving like incandescent waves. People shouted and their voices carried, but Nick could not understand what they said. One sounded like a mother calling his name over and over again.

Trudy came out through the door on the roof. They kissed each other as soon as they were close enough.

“What happened to your shirt?” she asked.

“I’m trying to air out a bit,” Nick said.

She hadn’t changed her clothes but had taken her hair out of the ponytail. She sat on the edge of the building and said, “Look what I’ve got.” She pulled a five-dollar bill out of her hip pocket. “I knew you’d be hungry and we didn’t have any leftovers, so…” She waved the bill in the air. “I could buy you a piece of pizza.”

“Where’d you get that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“You stole it from your mom, didn’t you?”

Trudy said nothing.

“Take it back,” Nick told her. “I don’t want you stealing. When your mom finds out, she’ll kill you.”

“It’s only five bucks. And you’re hungry.”

“I’m not. I had a bite to eat just before coming here.”

“Liar,” she said and hopped off the ledge. She opened the rooftop door and said, “Come on.”

“Honest. The kid on the fire escape gave me some soup,” Nick said.

Trudy went through the door and Nick snatched his shirt and had to jog to catch up to her.



Trudy brought Nick to the only open pizza shop that sat next to a twenty-four hour liquor store. It had overly saturated photos of Greece hanging on the walls and the guy behind the counter sweated badly. Trudy bought two slices of pepperoni and brought them to Nick, who sat at the counter at the large window in the front. Trudy took a pepperoni from a slice and ate it.

“You really shouldn’t have taken that money,” Nick said.

“Shut up and eat your pizza,” she said.

Nick folded the piece of pizza in half and took a big bite out of it. He followed it with another. Trudy watched him eat with a grin on her face.

“Maybe you are a lion after all,” she said and plucked another pepperoni off the remaining slice and ate it.

“I changed mine,” Nick said with a mouthful. “I’m not a lion anymore.”

Two guys walked past the window and they looked in on Nick and Trudy. They went into the liquor store.

“Have you settled for tortoise?” Trudy laughed.

Nick swallowed and tongued a piece of cheese from between his teeth. “No. I decided I’d be Man.”

“Man?” Trudy said. “You can’t be Man. Man’s not an animal.”

“Why not?”

“Cause, we’re above the animals,” she said.

A shotgun blast clapped next door. All the photos shook from the wall and broke apart and Trudy screamed.



Nick had managed to calm Trudy down by the time they reached her apartment building. He kissed her goodnight, but she didn’t want him walking around alone.

“Tonight’s no different from any other,” he told her.

“Is that supposed to help?” she said, sniffing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nick walked to the nearest subway station. He hopped the ticket gate and got on one of the southbound trains. The skinny train felt like it was traveling down the tube to the Earth’s core. The air grew thicker and hotter and used. Nick couldn’t take a breath of air that had not passed through some other human like he could taste it. He walked from car to car, his face sweating and his hair falling down to his eyes.

Nick found a drunk slumped across a bench in an empty car. His skin was a shade of green and his rank pants were dark with urine. Nick was careful not to touch the man more than he needed when she took the wallet out of his pocket. Nick folded the thirteen dollars he found inside and stuffed it into his pocket and dropped the empty wallet by the drunk's head. He kept moving through the cars until he saw four other teenagers laughing and hanging upside down from the handrails. Nick got off the next station and switched trains.

Only one other man rode the next train with Nick. He stood in a short-sleeved button down shirt that had been soaked through, revealing the wife-beater he wore beneath it. He sports jacket fell over his arm and his shoes showed the reflections of the passing lights. The pressure built as the train went deeper and it was like there was no sound, only the vibrations felt through their feet. The man wore an expensive watch and kept looking back at Nick who pretended to be asleep on the bench behind him. The train stopped and as the man left through the sliding doors Nick jumped up and swiped his wallet in one smooth motion. Nick watched the man stop on the platform and feel his pockets. The train rocked into motion, sliding along its rail and the man came running after it. He slapped his hand against a window but couldn't keep up. The man screamed for Nick, swearing.



DRAWING DOGS



Horace has to bait the lure. He has to bait the lure and he uses a bottle of scent extracted from rabbits to do it. A scent extracted from pheromones of obscure glands and piss mostly. Horace walks through the kennel under the track where all the hounds look and sniff from their steel cages. He walks past owners and trainers who are talking to themselves and to the dogs. There is one owner in a group of men with a greyhound that points its sharp muzzle at Horace. Its waist disappears almost entirely along its fragile frame. The owner tells the men the hound is ready to retire, that it placed consistently in every race for the past three years. The owner is trying to sell this hound to a breeder.

Horace doesn't care about that. He continues through into a concrete room with another set of cages, significantly smaller than the ones in the kennel. These cages house jackrabbits and brown hares. They eat scraps of lettuce and lap water from small Tupperware bowls. In the back of the bait closet is a cabinet with vials of a liquid, yellowish and not quite as thin as water, like varnish. Horace takes a vial and grabs gloves. He walks out onto the track, into the dense light pouring down. When he gets close, he can hear the electricity course through the inside rail. At the end, near the gates, is a junction box where Horace kills the electricity, hushing the rail.

He puts on his gloves and goes to the lure: a small, rubber hare that has a pelt stretched over it to simulate the real deal. Horace pours scent on the back of the lure and rubs it in. Hairs get stuck together and stand on end as he massages it. He mats down the hairs, toggles the junction box back on. Horace looks up into the stands. Old gamblers are

already there, scoping the track conditions, puffing into inflatable seat cushions. The dogs will go on display soon. Horace has to get up to his booth before that.

In the bait closet he notices a cage opened and empty. Horace walks through the kennel where there is a commotion at one end of the corridor, the end with the pups and the dirt floor. Donner, one of the trainers, wrestles with a pup as other trainers and the pup's owner look on. It's a milky white pup and it has something in its jaws. Horace walks up to them slowly and sees two legs sticking out the side of the pup's mouth. Donner looks up, grinning, and nods to Horace.

"Watch out now," Donner says, pulling at the ears of the hare.

The pup adjusts its grip and gets its teeth dug into the side of it. The pup jerks its head up and the belly of the hare splits. Blood squirts down Horace's pants. Donner keeps tugging, tearing, mumbling encouragement while the owner writhes his hands together greedily. More blood bubbles from the corner of the pup's mouth and his milky coat gets stained red. Horace leaves them and tries to wipe the blood away, smearing it. He walks through the cages of adult hounds. They all start to their feet when he gets close, smelling the violence on him. They bite at the air, shoving their snouts into the corners of their cages. They claw out to him and make whimpering noises and a hungry yipping. It is a long walk for Horace through the cages. All it would take is one to drive its fangs into his thigh, nipping off the femoral artery. Horace hates the kennel.



In his booth, Horace has the best view of the course. He is the lure operator. When the race starts he adjusts a dial which either speeds up the lure or slows it down, always keeping it an equal distance from the lead hound. Also in his booth is the announcer. His

name is Ratch. Ratch sees the blood on Horace's pants and asks: "What is this, your period?" He turns back to the microphone, adjusting his voice appropriately, and rambles off the racing record for each competing hound.

The night ends with a string of upsets, which sends the dwindling crowd into an uproar. The kind of uproar a hundred and fifty drunken businessmen can muster, so really it is more like a gargling vomit. They throw their tickets onto the track, spill beer over their ties, and punch each other in their red faces. Horace drives home slowly and lets the drunks weave on ahead of him. He lets them crash into someone else.



The apartment is dark with a lingering smell of a dinner having been cooked not long ago. His girlfriend must be here, he can feel her breathing upstairs, in his lofted bedroom. Horace opens his fridge and sees a plate made up for him. He takes it out and eats it cold, in the dark, over his sink. It is store-bought mashed potatoes and gravy soaked Salisbury steak. He eats it quickly, without tasting, and drops the plate in the sink. His bedroom is lit by glowing white walls and white sheets. Sherry is in bed but not asleep, he can tell. Horace takes off his bloodied pants and climbs into bed and feels that Sherry is naked under the covers. She turns and faces him, kissing his nose and face, grabbing his dick through his boxers.

They break a sweat over each other, Sherry on top. She fucks him until she comes and then slowly makes Horace lurch. He lies on top of rustled sheets to cool off. Sherry is asleep on him. She adjusts herself so that her head is no longer on the pillow but somewhere near his armpit. She starts to snore lightly. She snores a feminine snore, a small snore that is not ugly, but has a certain melodic moan to it. Her leg is clamped over

his lap, adhering to him by a thin film of dried sweat. His crotch itches with the chalky residue of condom and some Sherry which has congealed on him. Horace wants to be alone here.

He wants to get up and take a shower. He wants to never wear a condom again. He can't be sure if Sherry is the kind of woman who would secretly go off the pill, the type of woman who would use a pregnancy as leverage against him, forcing a commitment. Sherry has been coming over his place more and more often since he gave her that key three weeks ago. Now she comes unannounced, is there when he isn't, and has begun referring to things as "theirs." This behavior worries Horace. She wants to get married and he wants to shower. All he can smell is the stink of spermicide.

She stirs, squeaks slightly. Horace looks her over in the dark. She is not beautiful. A thirty-four year old pharmacist, with closely set eyes, a sharp chin, and a snaggle tooth. Her body, though, feels ten years younger. Long legs lead up to that ass. She has smooth skin that is drawn tightly over her stomach allowing for Horace's hands to grip her ribs like he was molded for him. Horace inches closer to her and smells her. He has rarely seen her shower. He also can't think of a time when she brushed her teeth around him. In the eight months since they met and fucked for the first time, he has become suspect of her hygiene. He takes another smell. It is not a bad odor. It seems healthy, a smell that he will never find anywhere else on the planet. Horace had never thought of it. He gets an idea.

Blindly he searches his nightstand until coming up with the pen he keeps bedside along with a small pad he uses to draw things. He looks down at her smooth thigh and draws a line on it, watching Sherry's face in the dark as he does. She doesn't move so he

licks his thumb and erases the line. He finds a spot on her hip that she won't be able to see. He draws something very small: a tiny handprint. As he's finishing she stirs again, making him toss the pen into the darkness. He pretends to be asleep which leads him to fall asleep. Sherry has gone to work at the pharmacy by the time he wakes. Horace goes to work once the sun begins to drop away.



In the intermission after the second race, Ratch leans over to Horace and asks if he bet on any of the hounds. They have this conversation every week and Horace gives his usual response, shaking his head, which means: no, he doesn't gamble anymore.

“Well,” Ratch says, “The number two hound, Rascal Rex, has got this next one. He's doped.”

Horace nods his head disinterestedly. Dogs are doped all the time at these tracks. Cocaine mostly. Other dogs are made slower through constipation. Everyone under the track makes money off of it.

“I put four-hundred down,” Ratch finishes saying.

The gates fly open and Horace turns the dial sending the lure off and away from the bolting hounds. He pushes the dial a little further as Rascal Rex gains ground, running along the inside of the track. Ratch's voice goes up a decibel as he announces Rascal Rex with an early lead. The hounds drive as fast as they can down the straightaway, heading into the first turn, the escape turn, it's called. Horace watches Rascal Rex and the lure as it stays a steady fifteen feet in front. Rascal Rex and the lure round the escape turn. Rascal Rex touches his shoulder to the inside rail. The hound goes rigid for a split-second, the electricity burning through its body, and topples to the dirt. It rolls twice

before the other dogs catch up and trample over it. A few of the hounds trip over the carcass so they too hit the dirt with their chests and roll off to the side. Ratch is silent. The cart that sits under the lure and propels it along the rail loses power and it slows to a stop. The dogs are on it in an instant. They beat at the lure and each other with their muzzled faces. The wire mesh of the muzzle is all that keeps the snapping jaws from finding throats to rip open.

Ratch looks over to Horace, saying: “What the fuck,” so that it echoes over the PA system.

Donner and the rest of the trainers storm the track holding onto leashes and blackjacks to beat the dogs off of one another. Rascal Rex lies dead in the track and one of the dogs limps over to it to try and bite out its eyes. The race is a scratch and the course closes for the night. There was nothing for Horace to do.



Horace is mopping up the rest of the ketchup from his plate with a finger’s worth of fries. He wipes the corners of his mouth with a napkin, crumples it up, and tosses it lightly on his soiled plate. The bartender clears the plate and refills his mug of ale. It gets late and a new crowd packs the bar, a younger crowd. It is a crowd that mostly observes Horace for an instant, sees his worn wool coat and the premature greys sprouting out of his head, and ignores him. They order cheap drafts and rum and cokes.

Horace asks the bartender for a pen and sketches the face of a hound on the small white napkin his beer had been resting on. It is plain, like a child’s drawing. The mouth is open and panting. He puts more weight behind the pen and adds fangs. He shades in the wrinkles across the dog’s face, foam appears at the leathery lips, and then he cages in the

jaws with a fine mesh. A woman standing next to him shoots her tequila and looks over to see his drawing. The dog's face looks chewed. The eyes are completely black.

“What's wrong with it?” she asks him from over his shoulder.

She has bleached hair played into curls and a mole drawn off to the side of her bottom lip. Thick makeup tries to hide the first wrinkles along her smile lines.

“Does it have rabies, or something?” She has a loud voice that is drunk.

Horace nods his head meaning: yes. Meaning: everything has rabies.

A better-looking slightly younger friend of the woman's comes over to them and sees the drawing and makes a face. Horace drinks his beer and cross-hatches over the dog so that it becomes layer upon layer of black. The napkin becomes wavy under the pen and tears. The woman shrugs her friend away and moves closer to Horace. Her breasts graze his arm and he buys her another tequila.



They sit in Horace's car outside the woman's house. Her eyes flutter as she asks him if he wants a drink. She had been mumbling what she plans to do to him since they left the bar. Horace follows her up the steps to her door and wonders if her hips are the kind that have borne children. The front door opens up onto a kitchen and the woman flashes on a fluorescent bulb overhead. Her heels click over the tiled floor.

From somewhere in the house a rampage of noise spurs up and a long, red retriever banks a corner into the kitchen. Its tail fans back and forth as it snorts the woman's feet. She pets it then leaves the kitchen behind. The retriever goes for Horace who slowly backs away and clenches his fists. The dog jumps onto his knees and slobbers. The woman talks from the other room.

“There are drinks in the fridge. Sorry about my dog. You like dogs, right?”

He pushes the retriever off his legs and the two stare at one another. The dog seems to smile. Horace taps his foot in the dog’s direction as if to say “Git!”

“You coming or what?” the woman’s voice calls out. Horace taps his foot again and the retriever licks his chops and does not budge. The woman appears in the doorway, she has lost layers.

“Rowdy,” she says, addressing the dog.

Horace looks up to the woman, she is fully present in the fluorescent light. The dog barks abruptly making Horace flinch.

“Come on,” the woman says in a low voice. “We don’t bite.”

Horace backs away from the dog and bows out the door.



Before Horace became the lure operator he had a different job at the tracks. When a hound became sick, hurt, or unwanted Horace would load its cage into the bed of his old truck and take it away. He was paid to take the dogs out to a plot of land outside town that never was built on. He was paid to dig a hole and he was paid to shoot the dogs into the hole and bury them. He did this for three years.

One night the lure operator at the track was drunk and not paying attention. He allowed the lead dog to catch the lure, knock it down, and bat it around with its muzzle. Four other dogs joined him before the trainers got out there and pried them away.

When a hound realizes the lure isn’t real, once it sees there is no blood or meat or life, it will stop chasing it. That night Horace had to kill five dogs. Healthy dogs. He dug a trench in the land, shot the first dog. The other four began barking. He shot the second

and third, taking each one out of its cage, leading it to the hole, and shooting it in the head so that it fell in.

After the third dog was shot, the last two snarled at Horace and snapped their jaws at him. He had to shoot them in their cages. He missed the kill-shot multiple times for each dog. He had to reload before they were dead. The bed of his truck was dotted by small caliber bullet holes and dripped blood. He filled in the trench, and never went back to that plot again. He took the open position as lure operator and did his best to stay away from the hounds.

Horace knows there is another man taking those dogs out to some plot of land, digging their shared grave, trying to shoot each one in the head. He knows this will not be a quiet act. That mercy has no role to play in it. Horace knows this.



Sherry stands in his apartment when he gets back. She is on the phone with her sister, and she waves to him silently. She turns her back to him and rummages through a grocery bag on the stove, her head cocked to hold the phone to her ear. She is wearing a tight shirt that binds up on her waist and exposes an inch or two of skin above her jeans. She pulls doughnuts from the grocery bag and shows Horace, smiling, giving her sister short answers over the phone. Horace wonders about Sherry. He wonders what she would say above the graves he dug. He wonders if she would find his hands covered in blood.

He wonders about the handprint drawn on her. He wraps his arms around her waist from behind, pressing himself against her. She laughs and he bites her neck. Sherry tells her sister goodbye and turns to face Horace. They kiss and Horace pushes her against the refrigerator, tugging at her shirt. "Well," Sherry tells Horace. He gets the shirt

off and Sherry helps him with her belt. She is naked in his kitchen and he licks her ribs and looks to her hip for the handprint. He spins her around and pivots her over the sink and looks over her body in case he forgot where he had drawn it. He massages her smooth skin and finds nothing. Sherry is clean. He steps away, but she grips the counter with her hands and pushes against him. Horace dirties her.

■ ■ ■

SMOKE



Everyone was dressed to the nines and looked so happy. They sat on foldable chairs with coarse, wine-colored cushions, around foldable tables draped with wine-colored table clothes. It was the Polish American Club's banquet hall filled. Troy and his wife Camilla sat at the head table facing everyone. She looked from one firefighting couple to the next and remembered when she had just married Troy. She had been so young and pretty and he was so strong, no different from the rest of them. How he would lift her. She sat smiling and laughing, sometimes too hard at the jokes told during Troy's roast. He took them well and laughed right along. It was his retirement party. He had been the firehouse chief, a burly firefighter before that, and this marked the beginning of something he had always dreamt of. He wore a black suit she had helped him pick out for a funeral the year before. He had nicked his jaw shaving for the party. No one knew but her.

After dinner in the metal serving trays was devoured, people got up and drank readily and began to party. They moved a good portion of the tables out of the way and a DJ, who had been staying quiet in the corner, started playing the hits. The young firefighters took their amused wives onto the floor and spun them around. Some couples pressed their bodies together lengthwise and did the slow circles. It was a lot like a wedding, Camilla noticed. After a little coaxing, being called an old man who hasn't got it no more, Troy took her onto the floor and they danced. He danced well and liked to dance but would never unless Camilla pressed him. He was tall and he kissed Camilla on the forehead and they all got a little drunk. It was their last loud night.



Retirement changed Troy. She'd never admit it though, only saying when people asked at the store, he's great, loving every minute of it, who deserves it more?

When she got home from the office she found him outside, in their backyard, drinking something on ice and petting their dog Hershey with his bare feet. She watched him and thought: he will never come home late smelling like smoke again. Never again will she wake to him lifting her hair and kissing the back of her neck.



It was night. She was in bed and Troy took Hershey for one, final, nightly piss. She got hot under the covers and checked herself in the bathroom. She made sure she was fresh, which she always was, and got back into bed. Troy came in, took off everything but the briefs and slid in beside her. He took off his glasses and clicked off the light and said, goodnight.

They kissed like always, but Camilla put her hand on his jaw and kissed again, longer. She went in with her tongue and searched through the sheets with her hands until he said he was sorry. Camilla stayed awake and began counting the days since they had last had sex. She counted the weeks and figured it had been two months ago. Then it became six months.



Troy read a book downstairs. Camilla stood in their bedroom naked in front of the full-length mirror on the inside of her closet door. She had all the lights on. She stood there, non-posing, and let the gravity just be. She found things: loose skin, dark freckles, an appendectomy scar, a vaccination crater. She had red knees like fists and her sex was

clouded behind hair. Her ass deflated. Her breasts hadn't flattened but did droop slightly. She looked natural. What was more natural than a breast, she thought.

She put on jeans and a sweater and sat with Troy in the living room. He read in his chair under a yellow light. He read biographies of Teddy Roosevelt and revenge westerns. He smoked cigarillos outside with Hershey. He went to matinée movies that he would tell Camilla about. The good ones he'd offer to see again if she felt like going. He swam at the Y. She watched him sit there, reading.

"Am I old?" she asked.

"Old? You're twenty years younger than me. If you're old, I'm dead."

■

On Sunday morning, the morning Troy always slept in; Camilla got up early, quietly and showered. She washed her sex and tried to keep her hair dry. Troy slept on his back and she slowly pulled the covers off him. She tried to wake him with her mouth. She used her tongue with little effect. He stirred, opened his eyes, and looked down at her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

■

She called out of the office, saying Troy was sick and she needed to stay with him. And no, it wasn't anything serious, just a stomach bug and he burns everything he eats. She rented a car, a red Mustang. Something no one would ever think to see her in. It cost her credit maximum but she would get all that back as long as she didn't wreck it. She followed Troy when he left the house. They pulled up to the Y.

Troy had vanished into the locker room and Camilla found a spot on the balcony that overlooked the pools. Behind her were the series of double doors that led to the

basketball courts. She could hear the slapping of the basketballs and the squeaking shoes and the men yelling. Troy came walking around the slick tiled floor and put his towel and flip-flops onto a chair. He looked natural too, she thought. A man utterly white haired. His body still held onto the shadow of his youth, as if all his muscles sank deeper into his body, they wrapped more tightly around bone. He dove in and did laps along the foam-roped lanes.

The door behind her clunked open like a vault and it made Camilla jump with a hand on her heart. Two sweating men exited and for a moment she saw the orange of the basketball courts behind them. The men wore loose shorts and one had no shirt. He was wiping sweat from his face with a towel and he saw her jump and smiled. He apologized and she said nothing because he had a six pack and his shorts sat very low on his hips. He looked at her like he'd fuck her. Camilla felt something ache inside.

Troy did laps, treaded water for a while, and then sank to the pool floor. When she first met him people called him Smoke. They called him that because he once entered a burning house without his respirator, holding his breath the whole time. They said he was gone for a full five minutes. He came out, carrying an old man in his arms, and had no smoke in his lungs. They said it was like he was already made of the stuff.

Camilla drove onto the highway and got the Mustang up to a hundred and ten before returning it.



Troy read from a book and drank bourbon in his chair. Hershey slept by a window. Camilla sat on the couch and pretended like he had gotten his groin blasted during some war he had never been a part of. She pretended a grenade or landmine had gone off,

hurling a piece of shrapnel the size of pencil lead into him, destroying something in there. She believed she could have dealt with that. She could have been a strong woman for that man.



BURY IT IN THE DIRT



David took a chair from the kitchen and put it directly under the porch light. His son, Sol, watched him, holding the small foot stool he used when he needed to make himself larger than he was, so he could help his father. It was only the two of them on their little cabbage farm. David sat in the chair and held a pair of scissors over his shoulder.

“Okay,” David said. “Cut only a little off at a time and try to keep it even.”

Sol placed the stool behind the chair and took the scissors.

“How do I know if I’m cutting too much?” Sol said.

“Take some hair between two fingers and cut what sticks out. Just be careful around the ears.”

Sol began cutting with the big, old, tailor scissors his father handed him. They made a sound like old couples hushing teens in a movie theater. Wisps of hair floated to the porch floor. It was hard for Sol to tell if he was getting every hair and he stuck his tongue out and bit it to help concentrate. David took out his pocketknife and cleaned his nails with it while Sol worked. He got off his stool, dragged it to the side, and cut the hair around David’s ear. Sol took special care, making sure no part of David’s ear got caught between the scissors before he closed them.

“Don’t forget to get the top, too,” David said.

“I haven’t.”

Sol moved his stool to the front and David had to spread his legs wide so he could get close enough.

“Close your eyes,” Sol said. “I don’t want to get hair in them.”

David never closed his eyes. He watched Sol's scrunched face and the way he bit his tongue. A piece of David's hair got stuck to the end of it. Sol blew it off and onto David's face, making him laugh.

"Stop moving," Sol said.

"Okay. Sorry. Hey, don't make me look like a Beatle, okay?"

"Huh?"

"The band."

"What?" he said and stopped cutting.

"Remember the band I had you listen to? The Beatles?"

"It's a hard day's night?" Sol said.

"Yeah," David said, smiling. "Don't cut my bangs straight like The Beatles."

"I'll try," Sol said and went back to cutting.

He had to move his stool once more, cutting around the other ear. Sol took a few steps back to look at his father. David's face was long and dry and his forehead wrinkled when he looked at Sol.

"Am I done?" David asked.

"I think so."

"How do I look?"

"The same."

"You did cut hair off, right?"

"Of course I did," Sol said. He picked a clump off the porch. "See."

"That looks like a lot."

"You had a lot to cut."

David ran a hand over the top of his head, knocking more loose hair off. He could feel the uneven patches.

“You can go look in the bathroom if you want,” Sol said.

“I trust you,” David said.

He folded his knife, got up, brushed the seat off, and sat Sol down. He took the heavy scissors out of his son’s tiny hand and spun them around like a gunslinger. He messed up Sol’s hair before snipping chunks away.

“Not too much,” Sol warned him.

“Just enough,” he said.

The piles of hair grew around their feet. The browns of Sol’s hair shined yellow in the porch light and mixed with the browns of David’s that shined red. Hair fell past Sol’s face and balanced on his nose. He blew it off, but something tickled his upper lip that he had to spastically scratch away. David held the scissors high above his son’s head and waited for him to be still again.

“You know, this is the way Grandma and I used to cut each other’s hair when I was a boy,” David said. “She used to say ‘ouch’ every time I cut some off.”

“Why? It doesn’t even hurt.”

“She was funny like that,” David said. He brushed all the hair off Sol’s head and shoulders and said, “You’re all done.”

Sol flapped his collar to get the hair itching beneath his shirt.

“How do I look?” he said.

“Clean. How do you feel?”

“Lighter.”

“Go get the broom,” David said.

Sol hopped off the chair and reached over his shoulder to scratch his back and neck.

“Don’t forget to put your stool away,” David said.

Sol stopped in the doorway, came back for his stool, and went inside. David tipped the chair and knocked it against the porch to get the hair off it. Sol handed him the broom and David swept the hair off the porch. Sol watched the hair swirl like needles of hay onto the grass.

“Grandma used to tell me you could plant wisps of hair like rosemary shoots and watch grow a baby out of the ground,” David said.

“I don’t believe you,” Sol said.

“Well, maybe not if you used our hair,” David said. “But if you took the hair of a lady and mixed it with the hair of a man and buried them in the dirt together...”

“That’s not how it works.”

“It could be.”



David started a bath for his son so he could wash the rest of the hair off his back. David stood in front of the mirror, trimming some of the patches on his head with the small scissors he took from the first aid kit. He struggled uncoordinated, trying to translate the movements of his actual hand with the movements of the hand in the mirror.

“Everything’s opposite,” David said. He carefully placed a few long strands in the scissors, snipped, and found he had missed them. He mumbled, “Goddammit.”

“Sorry if I messed up your hair.”

“You didn’t. I’m messing it up now. Goddammit. I shouldn’t have touched it.”

“It’ll grow back,” Sol said. It was something David often told him after a bad haircut.

“Yeah,” he said, leaning into the mirror, successfully cutting one long hair. “You should hurry up. I want to try and break up that bad land tomorrow and I’ll need your help.”

“Okay.”

Sol changed into pajamas in his bedroom. David left the bathroom door opened a crack and took his own bath. Sol could hear him splashing around.

He shut off the light so he could look out his window. The moon was bright and he could see his father’s truck, the barn, and the rows of soil fresh from a seeding. Bats fluttered in the purple night sky and vanished as they dropped in front of the silhouetted trees



David worked hard to get his land ready for seeding. He and his horse had plowed all the acres he owned, except a small patch of land that proved to be dead soil, far coarser than the rest. It felt hard enough to dance on under his boot and whenever he passed the patch of dirt David would spit on it vengefully.

David walked his horse and plow out to that patch of dirt, followed by Sol pushing a rusted red wheelbarrow with a pickaxe in it, jittering with every bump of the wheel. David tied the horse’s reins around the plow to keep it still. He spat on his palms before grabbing the pickaxe and he swung it into the earth. The surface of the soil broke

apart in plates. In no time at all, his shirt was soaked through with sweat and every ten minutes he needed to take a break. He passed the pickaxe to Sol.

Sol spat on his hands like his father and heaved the pickaxe as hard as he could, barely lifting it above his shoulder. Sol made little progress. As soon as he caught his breath and stretched his shoulders, David spat on his hands and got back to work. Once they had gone over the whole patch with the pickaxe, David got the horse and hitched the plow to it. He clicked his tongue to get the horse moving. The plow dug deeper with every pass and the soil churned up in black clumps.

Sol walked close behind them and picked up any stone larger than his fist and tossed it into the wheelbarrow. The plow kicked up a thin, curved rod like a miniature bow and Sol picked it up. It was hard and smooth and when Sol scratched the dirt off he could see a stained yellow surface.

He said, "Hey, look at this."

"Just a couple more passes," David said, trudging ahead.

Sol stuck the bow in his back pocket and saw more oddly shaped protrusions sticking from the dirt. David bellowed and the horse halted on the spot.

"Pop?" Sol said, catching up.

"Don't come any closer," David said and Sol stopped. "I want you to go back to the house, all right."

"What's wrong?" Sol said.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah."

“I need you to go back to the house and stay inside. Everything is all right. It’s nothing to worry about. You just need to stay inside for a while.”

“Okay,” Sol said.

“I’m gonna need your word on that,” David said.

“Okay.”

“Say it.”

“You have my word, Pop,” Sol said and he ran back to the house.

Half buried beneath David’s boot was a skull.



The sheriff’s Bronco pulled up and its headlights shifted shadows through the house. Deputy Jacobi and Deputy Pottage got out of the Bronco and slammed their doors shut. Perched at his window, Sol heard their boots knock onto the wooden porch.

David whistled and waved them over to the lanterned barn pitching orange light and blue shadows all across the field.

Sol went downstairs and opened the front door to try and hear what they were saying. The sheriff’s Bronco was parked right up to the porch and the CB radio inside crackled with static and then murmurings and then static again. Sol slipped on his boots and took his first step onto the yard, breaking his word. The second step was easier and soon he found himself running to the barn.



Through a gap in the siding, Sol could see pretty much everything. The deputies put all their weight onto one leg and had hooked their thumbs over their belts. David stood sort of facing Sol. The indifferent horse stood in its pen behind them all.

“Well, when’ll he get here?” David asked Jacobi.

“I called him. Not sure what else you’d like me to do. He’s gone to a wedding.”

“Sheriff’s been talking about that wedding this whole past month,” Pottage said.

“Why do we need to wait for Gabe anyhow? We’re here,” Jacobi said. “What did you want to show us?”

David got the rusted wheelbarrow from a dark corner and rolled it between the men. “I found this in my fields today.” The wheelbarrow held all the bones David could find stacked on top of one another. The skull rested on top.

“Jee-zus,” Pottage said.

Sol could see the skull glowing yellow. Its eye sockets and nose and the spaces between its upper teeth were clogged with thick black dirt. “Bones?” he whispered. He pulled out the bow from his back pocket. It glowed in the lantern light, same as the skull.

“Someone just left a wheelbarrow full of bones in your field?”

“Not exactly. My plow kicked them up under that patch of goddamned earth over there.”

“And then you put ‘em in the wheelbarrow and wheeled it in here?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, David,” Jacobi said. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“I couldn’t just leave them in the open like that.”

“Why the hell not?” Pottage asked.

“My boy could’ve seen them out there,” David said, getting excited, pointing to his unseen field with an upturned palm.

“You shouldn’t have touched ‘em,” Jacobi said. “You loused up the whole crime scene and evidence and whatnot.”

“What crime scene? They were buried under three feet of hardpan that no one’s bothered to break apart my whole goddamn life,” he said.

“I just wish you hadn’t gone and touched ‘em all is all,” Jacobi said.

David released a pent-up lungful. “Well, there’s not a helluva lot I can do about that now.”

“I’d like to figure out who these bones belonged to,” Pottage said. “Did you see any bullet holes or anything in her skull?”

“What did you say?”

“I asked if there were any bullet holes.”

“How you know these bones belong to a ‘her?’” Jacobi asked.

“I don’t,” Pottage said.

“But you called it ‘her’ skull.”

“When?”

“Two goddamn seconds ago,” David said.

“Well, look at ‘em. Look how small they are.” Pottage picked up the skull from the pile, his palm covering the entire crown of the skull. “Everything’s way too small to be a man’s.”

“Put that down,” Jacobi said. “David’s manhandled them enough.”

Pottage put it back. “I guess they could be from a little boy or something. Maybe a teenager.”

“Goddammit, Pottage,” David said, rubbing his eyes. “I’d rather not think I’m looking at a dead kid here.”

“Exactly,” he said. “I call ‘em like I see ‘em and I’m calling those lady bones.”



Sol took long, deliberate steps away from the barn until he could no longer hear the men talking. Then he broke out in a run toward the house. The bone gripped tightly in his hand.

He came to a stop at the porch and looked through the grass for hair. The Bronco was in the way and its radio still fizzed in the cab. Sol got on his hands and knees and then his belly, but it was too dark.

“Goddammit,” he said and slammed his fist into the ground.

A voice spoke from the radio in the Bronco and sounded like an android. Sol got up tried to open the driver side door. It was unlocked and swung open. A hub light brightened the cab, the dashboard blinked and pinged, and the soft bulb at the bottom of the door turned on. It dimly lit a ring of grass at Sol’s feet and shined off a strands of brown hair mingled into the blades of grass. He meticulously plucked the hairs off the ground, but got impatient and ended up ripping grass out with them.

Sol brought the rib and the hair and the grass to the little kitchen garden behind the house where David said Grandma used to grow zucchinis and tomatoes and basil. Only pigweed and crabgrass and wild things grew there now. Sol cleared a section of weeds and dug a hole. He laid the rib flat in the hole and sprinkled the hair and grass over it. He raked the dirt over the rib and slapped it flat. He stood and brushed his hands against his jeans. He hoped that was good enough. Bones were more potent than hair.

Sol jumped at the sound of his father and the deputies talking nearby.

■

“As long as you give me your word you’ll be here in the morning,” Jacobi said.

“It’s my farm. Where the hell am I gonna go?”

“I mean, don’t leave this house. Don’t go into town. Don’t go to the market.”

“Don’t even take too long a shit,” Pottage said.

“I just know Harvey’s gonna have a helluva lot of questions for you and if you aren’t here to receive ‘em I’m gonna get the bitching of a lifetime.”

They walked to the front of the house and Deputy Jacobi and Deputy Pottage opened the doors to the Bronco at the same time. David stepped onto the porch. Sol tried to reach a window above him, but he was too short. He needed his stool.

“So, I can count on you?” Jacobi asked with one boot in the Bronco.

“You have my word,” David said.

Sol’s hands began to shake when he heard it and he frantically tried to think of a way into the house without his father seeing.

David waited until the Sheriff’s Bronco quickened down the driveway before going into the house. He muttered, “Sol?” softly in every passageway. All the lights in the house were off and he went up the stairs to his son’s bedroom.

Sol opened the front door but paused when he heard his father say, “Sol?” loud enough to radiate beyond the house. David banged through doors upstairs and Sol felt the walls shudder with every step he took. Sol waited in the doorway to apologize and David became the loudest thing to ever run down stairs.

■■■

TO LIVE BY A RIVER



“I want to live by a river,” she said.

So, we moved into a house on the river. Its yard sloped down to the water where the lonely willow tree grew.

“Which room will we sleep in?” I said.

“One with windows facing the river,” she said.

She opened the windows to listen. Even at night it flowed, gushing over black rocks. Streaks of white foam rolled over the water. Slowly the river licked the black rocks to nothing.

“It’s been flowing since before anything,” she said.

“Well, not since before water,” I said.

She didn’t find that funny.



“Let me tell you a secret,” she said.

“Okay,” I said.

“I have a fantasy.”

“Is that the secret?”

“Don’t,” she said. “I have a fantasy that I live inside a movie where you are an action hero. The kind that has lost his memory for one reason or another. Maybe you got shot in the head once, or the government erased it. Whatever the reason, it sort of makes you vulnerable in a strong way. I imagine men are after you and we’re on the run, and they catch me and use me to lure you out from hiding and then the big shootout begins.

It's all very exciting," she said. "What I mean to say is: sometimes when we fuck, I picture Jean-Claude Van Damme."

So, I bought a pistol. A sleek pistol advertised as being able to kill a bear wearing chainmail. I kept it loaded and hid it beneath my pillow for her to find.

"What is this?" she said, pulling it from beneath my head.

"Shhh," I said. "It's for your own protection that we don't talk about it."

She held onto all of its potential for explosion and we had the best sex.



In the summer of our first year by the river we tried to swim in it.

"I think the current might be too strong," I said.

We wore our bathing suits barefooted. The slop and stones along the riverbed hurt and grossed us out equally. We got out to past our knees but found it hard to remain standing. We held hands in case the other one washed away.

"We tried," I said.

"Dammit," she said. "I really wanted to swim."

So, I made a kind of dam with whatever stones I could find in the water. It created a little pocket where we could sit and splash each other.

"This is nice," she said. "Exactly what I had in mind."



In the winter my little pool froze sort of. A layer of ice built up on the surface, but before too long it always broke apart and sailed down river. Even through winter it flowed. We listened to it through our open windows and it got so cold we could see our breath in bed.

"I have a secret," I said.

“A fantasy?”

“No. My secret is that, if I could, I would have a fire burning constantly,” I said.

“I don’t think that counts as a secret,” she said.

“Okay, fine. What if I said my secret is that I want to set everything on fire?”

“Everything?”

“Buildings and houses and cars and refrigerators and computers and vacuum cleaners. Everything. Because, what does all that stuff even look like on fire? What does it sound like? What melts, what chars, what shatters?”

“How about people?” she said.

“Maybe not people, but a body? Sure. How does that work?” I said.

“Remember when they set Vader on fire at the end of *Return of the Jedi*?” she said.

■

“Why don’t we shoot the pistol,” she said.

“Sure. Where?”

“At the river. We can’t kill the river,” she said.

We bundled up because of winter and I brought the pistol with all the ammo I owned. The pool had ice covering it that morning.

“Perfect,” I said.

I blasted holes into the ice and it broke apart like a dinner plate.

“My turn,” she said.

“Careful. Use both hands.”

“Please,” she said and fired into the water with one hand and her body turned sideways and with only her aiming eye open.

“Pretty fun, right?” I said.

“How cool would it be if we shot a fish,” she said, reloading the magazine. “We could eat it.”

So, I tried real hard to shoot a fish but the water was so cold it looked like metal and I couldn’t see a thing beneath its surface.



After shooting it, the pistol lost some of its flare and our sex stopped being the best. I had a fire going and she sat beside me watching movies.

“Watch the fire,” I said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I got the pistol and went outside and pointed the pistol at my side and shot myself. I aimed just above my left hip and tried to shoot myself as close to the edge of my body as I could. The bullet went straight through me as planned. At first it just felt like a Band-Aid coming off. Then it felt wet as the blood began to gush out of me, soaking in my clothes and flowing down the leg. It hurt real, real bad.

“What did you do?” she said.

“I shot myself.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I’m really bleeding here,” I said.

“What do I do?”

“Call somebody. Holy shit.”

She got a dish cloth and pressed it on my bullet hole. She had the phone held to her ear with her shoulder.

“That’s too much blood,” she said. “There shouldn’t be so much blood.”

“I know,” I said.

Jean-Claude Van Damme never bled that much.

“Can you stitch me up?”

“But I’m already on the phone with the ambulance,” she said.

I pissed my pants.

“Shit,” I said. “I thought this would be sexier.”



First they took a couple feet of my intestines out and said no one really needed all the feet of intestines we’re born with anyway. Then they took my pistol and said no one like me really deserved to own a pistol anyway.

I got out of the hospital right as the curtains of winter pulled back to reveal spring arriving. The scar from the bullet looked like a sun made out of flesh.

We got home and she studied my scar. She touched it in awe and we had the best sex.

“What did they replace your intestines with?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“So, what? You just have empty space in there now?”

“I suppose,” I said.

“I hope your guts don’t move around a whole bunch,” she said.

“Yeah. Me too,” I said.

■

It never took a single break from flowing. In summer, I caught the fish I couldn't shoot and we ate them off the grill. The windows stayed open so we could hear the river stir through the nights. She started all the fires of winter for me.

■■■

SMALLEST SWIMMER



The sculptor had a husband who was a photographer. She had a sister and a father. Her mother died while the sisters were still in college and the father had been left alone to deal with it. The sculptor had a brother-in-law who gambled and two nephews. The boys, aged one and five, were named Quentin and Luke. The gambler was called Hop. The mother's name had been Sissy and the father's name was Henry, but everyone called him Shake because he played baseball when he was young and specialized in throwing knuckleballs. Her sister was Cori. The photographer's name was William, but liked to be called Will best. The sculptor was Natalie.



In May the two sisters met for coffee. Natalie wore her hair up and loose. She was glowing in her always active way. She looked best like that: slightly disheveled, perpetually having just caught her breath, easy to smile. She had an attractive mole beneath her lips and lines had begun to develop along her mouth that made her look strong, distinguished, which she was. She had become a fairly famous sculptor in her twenties with a piece called *Duet*. It was crudely made with clumps of clay thumbed onto the wire skeletons of a couple dancing and then bronzed, but the critics had said: "Never before has movement been so thoroughly explored or precisely executed in the medium." Now, she worked with her husband, sculpting busts of women he photographed from around the world. Always women. Always anonymous. They were from Kosovo or Georgia or Norway or whatever far corner he found himself in. She had clay under her nails.

Cori sat crookedly at the table with Quentin in a stroller. She was young and pale and had a much calmer face, like a windswept snow field, her lips the red barn. Her large brown eyes and darker hair made them hardly look sisters. But they shared a straight Greek nose and long necks.

The baby yawned in the stroller and his leg shook as it stretched. Cori put her foot on the stroller and rocked him slightly. She rotated the ring around her finger as she listened to Natalie talk about her newest project.

“And how are my little men?” Natalie finally asked.

“Good. Quentin still sleeps most of his days away. And all Luke can talk about is going to the cabin with Auntie.”

“Has Hop figured out how much time he can get off?”

“Two weeks total. He doesn’t know if he wants to take the two weeks all at once or spread it out.”

“Will won’t get there until the third, if that matters.”

“I think he’ll spread it out. Who knows? Are you ready?”

“I cannot wait,” Natalie said, rocking slightly in her chair. She had a leg tucked under her and her empty shoe sat foreignly alone on the ground. “I packed up all my supplies this morning.”

“I hope it gets cold at night,” Cori said. “I want to build fires and have to bundle up in blankets.”

Natalie nodded and sipped her coffee as if the air had suddenly gotten very cold all around her. “Those blankets,” she said.

“The one mom made with all the patches.”

“It weighs seventy pounds.”

The sisters cozied up their shoulders thinking about it.

“Have you talked to Dad? Is he going to come up?”

“He said maybe,” Cori said, “which could mean anything.”

“I wish he would.”

“He said he was up there once the snow melted to check on it and fish. He said everything should be all ready for us.”

“How’s he doing?”

“You know Shake.”



The cabin rested deep within the Adirondacks, in the town of Cobb. After a short, rutty driveway sat the cabin amid all the evergreens. Past it was a steep path that led to the dock on Three-Cornered Lake, the largest in a long chain of lakes and ponds and swampland that collected themselves around the mountains. Hitched to the dock was the father’s small aluminum fishing boat with a blue tarp covering it.

The cabin itself was built of dark wood painted darker. It had a strong roof and, because of the steep hill it stood on, was largely supported by huge pinewood pillars. The back of the cabin consisted of a large roofed deck that looked out to the trees and the lake just beyond. Thin walls divided the insides into three bedrooms, a living room with the dining table at one end and the fire hearth in the other, and an open kitchen too small to have both the stove and fridge open at the same time. The living room had a high angled ceiling with a fan hanging dormant there. Two couches sat on the floor, which had been covered entirely with a hundred carpeting swatches and samples, each 12x12 square a

different color or texture or pattern and they all had a brass grommet in one corner. They had been laid in the sixties and represented the era completely in palette and design and stinginess.

Natalie drove up in her Jeep filled with fifty-pound blocks of clay that she was warned could mess with the suspension in the long run. Natalie drove with the top down singing Tracey Chapman and Ricki Lee Jones.

Cori followed behind with Quentin and Luke in the backseat.

“Do you think he’ll learn how to swim faster than me?” Luke asked, staring at Quentin in the baby seat beside him.

“I don’t think anyone has ever learned how to swim faster than you,” Cori told him.

Luke was only five and already perfectly able to keep his head above water on his own. His only stroke was the doggy-paddle.

“Do you think he’ll be brave enough to jump off the dock younger than me?”

“I don’t think so, honey.”

“I’m gonna jump off this year, I know it.”

“You’ll jump off when you’re ready and not before. And you’ll wait until Daddy is around to teach you.”

“Is Auntie already there?” he asked.

“Nope. That’s her car right in front of us.”

“Will Uncle Will be there?”

“Not yet. How’s Quentin?”

“Fine.”

“Is he asleep?”

The brothers searched each other’s faces. Quentin chewed on an inflatable plastic hammer. “Not really,” Luke said.

After they pulled up the cabin and got out, they took one, ceremonious, deep breath in through their nostrils.



Dinner happened at eight o’clock after everyone had gotten into their pajamas. They ate sandwiches and Luke nearly fell asleep on his. Cori breastfed Quentin and ate over him. She had to brush away the crumbs that fell on his head. Afterwards, Cori helped Natalie polish off a bottle of wine, drinking only a glass. Natalie sat on one of the couches, curled up in the corner, and Luke nestled up at the other end. Their legs were tangled together and Luke slept with his little body expanding with every breath he took. Cori was on the second couch with Quentin stretched out beside her. She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“How old is he? Exactly I mean,” Natalie said.

“Exactly? He is nineteen months and two days and,” she looked over her shoulder at the small clock above the fire place, “two days and two hours.” It was just before midnight. “I mean twenty-two hours. Whatever, he was born at two in the morning two days and nineteen months ago.”

“I remember the two a.m. part.”

“It was miserable.”

“Poor Luke was so brave.”

“I think he’s getting a little competitive with the baby,” Cori said.

“Yeah?”

“I feel like it’s just beginning, but yeah.”

“You think it has to do with the breastfeeding?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“Just, you’re breastfeeding Quentin longer than you had for Luke.”

“Luke doesn’t know that.”

“Subconsciously. Freudianly.”

“Do you think it’s weird I’m still breastfeeding Luke?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It’s not weird. I’ve read that you can breastfeed up to two years old or even longer. If I could I would go back and breastfeed Luke for the same amount of time.”

“Okay.”

“But I can’t now.”

“What?”

“Go back in time.”

“No.”

“I’ll only do it for a little longer. Just until the end of summer and only before bed.” She rubbed the baby’s tummy.

“Okay.”

The sisters had the sliding door open a crack so they could hear the occasional loon. They drank their wine quietly. Eventually a loon did hoot and they sighed and shut their eyes.



For two weeks the women were alone with the boys in the woods. The days were spent on the dock, getting tan, drinking, swimming with Luke, reading, talking, and hiking up paths with Quentin buckled across Cori's back and looking over her shoulder. Cori would have a glass of wine after feeding Quentin and Natalie would finish the rest of the bottle.

Natalie worked on the deck with her clay and a photo of a Georgian woman with the blackest hair and freckles under her eyes was tacked onto the wooden post next to it. Her stare pierced through the photograph. She looked strong. Luke sat, watching from a chair.

"Who's she?" he asked.

"A woman."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know."

"Then why are you making her?"

"Because she's beautiful."



The first of the men to arrive was Hop. His pick-up rolled up early one Saturday morning. He tried to move quietly through the cabin, but the glassware in the antique credenza still rattled with every step, sounding like a dozen crystalline snakes. He poked his head into the rooms. He saw Natalie in the master bedroom asleep with only her hair showing from under the blankets like spilt paint made anciently of yolks and dirt.

Cori and the boys slept in the room with the two twin beds next to each other and the crib between them. Luke was in bed with Cori. Both their eyes were shut so tightly it seemed like they were faking. He kissed Cori on the nose. She jolted awake, nearly

head-butting him, and the baby started crying and Luke woke up, chattering as fast as he could about all the things Hop had missed as if he was continuing a conversation he had been having in his dream.

Hop got drunk off beer and played with Luke in the water. He lifted Luke up with one arm and the two jumped off the edge of the dock together.

“I’m jumping off the dock,” Luke yelled up to his mom.

“More like falling,” Hop said and nudged him into the water with his foot.

By the end of the day the two of them were sunburnt and pink together. Hop made Luke proud of his burn. It meant you were tough enough. Luke walked around with his shirt off all day same as Hop.

“The direct air contact helps,” Hop told his son.

At night Cori lathered them both with aloe.



Hop went out to the bar after Cori and the kids fell asleep to play keno and touch base with all the locals. He came home to Natalie on the deck surrounded by candles. He snagged a beer out of the fridge and went out to her.

“Looks like a séance out here,” he said.

Natalie didn’t jump. She had heard the truck and saw the headlights bend around the cabin. She was wearing a scarf with her sweater and her big hiking boots over her flannel pajama pants. She was working on the Georgian woman again.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Nearly one.”

Hop drank his beer and leaned over the railing to look up. The black trees were all he could see. He looked back at his sister-in-law in the candlelight. She looked beautiful. His wife was beautiful. If he had met their mother, she would have been beautiful. He felt very lucky. He felt like this was all he could ever want: to be out in the middle of nowhere with beautiful women, his children, a lake, and a fridge stocked with beer. He sucked his bottle and said, "I'm going down to the dock to see how many stars are out. Wanna come?"

"I just have to get this nose right," she mumbled.

Only a few lights brightened the houses on the opposite shore. The unpredictable orange of a bonfire burned in the campgrounds across the bay. Shadows flicked by and sparks popped and floated through the branches above.

The air was cool to the touch and above the lake were infinite stars and no moon. Hop could see the Milky Way and it was like looking down at luminescent canyons from an impossible height. He stood awestruck for a moment, then took a drink, and yelled, "Jesus Christ, you have to see this."

Natalie downed the wine in her glass, blew out the candles, and carefully walked down to the dock. She stood next to Hop and looked around the lake.

"It's so quiet," she said.

"No, look up."

She did and said, "Wow."

"Have you ever seen it before?"

"Not for a long time."

“I’ve never seen it before. Not with the naked eye, I mean. Not with my own eyeballs.”

“It’s something else.”

“Dammit, I’m going swimming,” Hop said and began kicking his boots off and taking off his flannel shirt-jacket. “Come on,” he said.

“You get in and tell me how it is.”

Hop got down to his skivvies and then slid them off. Natalie had seen his bare ass and cock before during a much younger night swimming adventure. But Cori and Will had been there too. Now it was just the two of them, alone, but the way Hop moved, nonchalant in his nudity, it was like Natalie wasn’t even there. He jumped in and she waited for him to break the surface again. It wasn’t until all the ripples had nearly stopped from his splash that his head bobbed up to create new ones.

“How is it?” Natalie asked.

“Fucking cold.” Hop looked up and backstroked farther from shore. “But it’s worth it.”

“Shit,” Natalie said and began untangling her scarf. She hadn’t been wearing a bra all day, but she kept her white cotton panties on. She jumped in and held her nose shut from the water. When she came up she couldn’t say anything, just short, sharp breaths. She swam out to Hop and looked up. The water reflected the stars and they swam between them, their ripples moving constellations.

“All that light,” Hop said, “is millions of years old. If you lived there and you had a telescope that could look to Earth, you’d see dinosaurs running around right now.”

“When I look up there, I want to know everything,” Natalie said. “Absolutely everything.”



Will arrived the next night at dinner, spaghetti made by Natalie. He walked in the door and said, “There’s no place to park out there.”

Natalie spun around with both hands full of crushed tomatoes. She couldn’t squeeze him like she’d wanted but he did kiss her on the lips. He rolled up his sleeves and asked what she needed help with.

“Say hi first.”

Will went through the cabin and shook hands with Hop, picked up Luke, kissed baby Quentin in his crib, and gave Cori a quick hug. Soon enough, they all sat down and ate dinner.

“So,” Hop said, “where are you coming from this time?”

“A country called Bhutan in the Himalayas. There isn’t a place like it. Just the most beautiful people and scenery.” Will leaned into Luke and said, “And they’ve got this animal there that looks like a cross between a goat and a bear.”

“They got bear-goats?” Luke asked excited.

“It’s called a takin and they climb mountains and fight each other.”

“Did you take pictures?” Luke asked and everyone laughed.

“I did,” Will said, matching Luke’s excitement. “But that wasn’t even the weirdest thing. They have a deer there...with fangs.”

“Whoa,” Luke said.

“Yup. I got a picture of one of those too.”

“Are you serious?” Hop said with a fork of spaghetti hanging in front of his mouth.

“A musk deer. I’ll have to develop them for you all.”

“You didn’t send in your rolls?” Natalie asked.

“I kept a couple for myself. One is full of shots I took just for you.”



Will converted the third bedroom into his darkroom. He brought his own red bulb, chemicals, and he taped the blinds shut over the windows. When he worked in there he would prop a chair against the door so no one could burst in. He developed Natalie her roll and they looked through them together. All the shots were striking with vibrant fabric and soft, smiling faces. They were of almost all the women from this one village, Will told her. One photo was of a little girl around twelve. She had a smudge of dirt on her chin and a kid goat in her arms. The smile on her face disarmed completely.

“Who is she?”

“Just a little girl playing with a goat,” Will said.

Natalie pushed him. “I can see that. Tell me something else about her.”

“I only saw her the once,” he said, shrugging.

“What do you say to them?”

“I usually just ask if I can take their picture.”

“And they just say, ‘sure, what the hell?’”

“Pretty much,” Will said. “Sometimes I don’t say anything. I just snap the shot while they aren’t looking.”

Natalie looked at the little girl with her goat. Her smile and eyes were perfectly vivid in the thin atmosphere. How did she see Will? Did she see him as a safe thing? A protector? Or was he something uncertain? A seducer? What kind of man was he to these women?

“How is the Georgian coming along?” he asked.

“I think I’ve finished her,” she said.

Natalie unwrapped the plastic around the bust that kept it from drying out. The face was of a middle-aged woman. Natalie had poked tiny holes in the prominent cheekbones to give her those definitive freckles. Her lips were fat, stubborn.

“She’s beautiful,” Will said.

“What did you say to her?” Natalie asked.

Will took the photo pinned to the post and looked at it closely. “To her, I said, ‘Sorry.’”



Will and Hop left the same morning. Hop went back to work and Will said he’d be back as soon as his meetings with the magazine were over. He left the darkroom as it was and Natalie developed his other rolls for Luke to see the animals. He also left the old Minolta with a roll in it. It was the one he bought in Japan when he was in college and still used for fun with a simple shoot-what-you-see-lens. Natalie took the camera and spent the day in the woods, alone.

She stopped to photograph twisting roots or collections of moss that had a certain intensity when the sun hit through the branches above. She went along an old overgrown

path running parallel with the shoreline. She found an old stump, jagged and brittle from termites. Out of the top grew a purple wildflower she had to get on her knees to shoot.

She finished the roll with shots of Quentin lying in the sun with sunglasses and a bucket hat on. Luke swam in circles with his face barely under the surface. He would pop up when he needed to breathe and say, “Did you see that? I went under.”

Cori stretched out with a book in her hands. She wore a bikini and her body looked elastic. Her skin turned darker every day with little flashes of white peeking out from under straps.

Natalie developed the roll. In the first pictures there was still snow on the ground. Natalie’s father, Shake, was in a few, sitting in his chair with glasses on the end of his nose. Will had got his face straight in one which made him look like an author of speeches. There were a couple of Luke opening presents and one of Hop holding baby Quentin in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. Photos of Natalie, never knowing a picture was being taken of her. There was a shot of Cori smiling at the camera. Then another. Then another. Natalie tried to figure out what room they had been taken in. Then it was Cori hiding behind a door frame with her naked ass visible and her smiling face half hidden. Natalie quickly dipped the picture into the fixing liquid, shook it dry, and tore away the blinds from the window to see clearly. The sunlight blasted in, erasing all of the undeveloped film, and made Cori’s face shine.

Late that night Natalie began her next sculpture. She tacked the picture of Cori naked onto the post. With a length of wire Natalie sliced the clay block down to an oval. She dug her thumbs in where the eyes go.

■

Natalie woke up to Quentin crying. Cori paced through the living room with him in her arms, hushing him and rubbing his back.

“I think he had a nightmare,” Cori said. “I didn’t think babies were supposed to have nightmares.”

“Don’t ask me,” Natalie said. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. “Oh,” she said and reached into the darkroom bedroom. “Look at this photo I found.”

She gave Cori the picture of Shake in his chair. Cori smiled and pinched it between two fingers on the hand the held Quentin’s butt.

“I think it’s from this past Christmas,” Natalie said.

“I think you’re right. He looks so handsome,” she said as if she were talking about one of her children. “He actually called here yesterday.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He said he should be able to come up next month.”

“Should be able to,” Natalie repeated in his deep voice. “Like he has these big plans that might come up.”

Cori shrugged, which turned into bouncing Quentin in her arms. “Who knows what that man does. Maybe he has lady friends that he doesn’t want us to know about. Judging by this picture, I’m surprised he’s managed to stay single for this long.”

Natalie walked into the kitchen. “Coffee?” she asked.

“Thanks.”

A fog sat on the lake and a single boat soared over the water. It was early. Cori went out the sliding doors onto the deck and saw Natalie’s new sculpture wrapped in plastic sitting on the railing. The post next to it had a thousand minuscule holes stabbed

into it from all the pictures Natalie had tacked there over the decades, making it looked like some war torn chapel that had been used as a machinegun bunker. The photo of Cori was under Natalie's pillow.

"You've started a new one already?" Cori said.

Natalie waited by the brewing coffee with her hand on her hip, her eyes half asleep still. The coffee machine hissed and popped. Natalie took Cori's mug that had bear paws walking around it and dropped a big glob of spit into the bottom. She filled both mugs up with coffee and left room in Cori's for her milk and sugar.

Natalie brought the coffees outside. Cori tilted her head at the sculpture. Through the plastic, a blurred silhouette could be seen.

"Did you do this all last night?"

"I was up pretty late."

"If you feel like taking a break I think I'm going to take Quentin for a hike today," Cori said.

"I'd rather keep working," Natalie said.

"Would you mind watching Luke then? He gets so bored on my walks."

"No problem," she said, watching as Cori slurped her coffee.



Luke watched Natalie work from the chair again.

"Here," Natalie said and tossed him a chunk of clay she scraped from the hollows of Cori's cheeks.

"That kind of looks like my mom," Luke said. Luke squeezed the clay and it percolated through the spaces between his fingers.

Natalie used a wooden blade to carve the exact ridges of her eyelids.

Luke rolled his clay between his hands, stretching it out into a snake that then turned into a bracelet around his wrist. “Is it my mom?” he asked.

“No,” Natalie answered quickly and then, “Yes.”

“Are you making her because she’s beautiful?”

Natalie stopped what she was doing for a second. She said, “Yes.”

“Are you going to give it to her?”

“Yes.”

Luke smushed his clay bracelet and got bored and wandered off. Natalie did not notice. She worked on her sister’s big dark eyes. Next was the mouth that was smiling in the picture so sensually. There was a splash. Natalie stopped and listened.

“Luke?” she said. Another splash. She ran down to the dock and found Luke climbing out of the water. He ran and he jumped off the end of the dock in a cannonball and crashed down, bobbing up almost immediately, laughing.

Natalie pointed at her feet and snarled through her teeth, “Get over here.”

He waded over to the edge of the dock and Natalie grabbed his arm and jerked him up.

“Ouch,” he said. His arm dangled limp in her hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I jumped off the dock all by myself,” he said, half proud, half scared.

Natalie slapped him across the butt and the wet bathing suit stung her palm.

“Never go swimming unless there’s someone down here with you,” she said.

With eyes brimming in tears, he said, “That’s why I wore my floaties.” Around his arms were two, orange, inflated cuff.

Tears broke free and fell over his already dripping face. He had big, dark eyes just like his mother and her dark hair on his tousled head. Natalie struck him across the cheek. His face immediately reddened where her hand hit and when he grimaced to cry there were strands of blood in his teeth.

“You don’t go swimming alone,” Natalie screamed.

She finally let go of his arm and he bawled all the way up to the cabin. Natalie did not move for a moment. The puddle Luke had dripped onto the dock was quickly drying before her. She walked back up to the cabin. She put her ear against the bedroom door, listened to Luke cry, opened a bottle of wine, and then finished her sculpture.

■

Cori came back sweating through the bandana tied around her head meant to keep strands of hair from sticking to her face. She put Quentin in his playpen in the living room and peeked out at Natalie who was drinking the last of the bottle, face to face with the sculpture.

“Where’s Luke?” Cori asked.

“Bedroom,” Natalie said. She drank the glass and waited.

“Luke?” Cori said, opening the bedroom door. After a minute, she burst through the cabin and onto the deck. “What the hell happened?”

Natalie stepped to the side so Cori could see the sculpture. “He jumped off the dock alone while I was up here working.”

“He’s bleeding for Christ’s sake.” She glanced past the sculpture and stopped. She looked back at it. “Is that me?” she said.

“I was trying to finish it when he snuck off.”

“I don’t understand,” Cori said. She moved closer to her grey face. “Why would you make me? What does this have to do with Luke? Why is there blood in his goddamn mouth?”

“Because I slapped him.”

“You did what?” she snapped.

Quentin stood in his playpen and began to cry watching them.

“It’s all your fault,” Natalie said.

“What are you talking about? How is any of this my fault?”

“Figure it out, Cori,” Natalie shouted. “I only sculpt women Will takes photos of. How long did you think you could get away with it?”

Cori looked back at the sculpture and the picture tacked to the post beside it.

“Do you two still go at it?” Natalie asked. She took a step toward Cori. “How about here? Did you do it here?” She took another step. “When exactly was the last time my husband was inside you?”

Cori put two fingers on the sculpture’s forehead. “You hit my fucking kid,” she said and pushed it off the railing. She turned and walked into the cabin.

The front door banged shut and Will came walking in.

“Perfect timing,” Cori said. She lifted Quentin from the playpen, crying. “Luke? Come on, sweetie. We’re going home.”

“What’s going on?” he said. “Cori?”

Cori stomped around the cabin with Quentin in one arm and grabbing stuffed animals and clothes with the other. She shoved everything into a bag Luke held open behind her.

“Natalie?” Will said.

Natalie stood on the deck, leaning over the railing. Her shoulders quaked as she cried.

“Could someone tell me what the hell is going on?”

Cori stopped and said, “She found out and thought a good way to get me back was to slap Luke across the face.”

“What?”

“Ok, boys,” Cori chirped to her sons. “Let’s go.”

“But all our stuff?” Luke said, his face stained red from crying.

“We’ll come back later,” she said, and the three of them walked out the door.

The cabin fell into complete silence after the door swung shut and Will did not move an inch. “Natalie?” he said and waited for her to turn around.

She never did and, eventually, he left too.



Shake always got up early when he was at the cabin. He left the blinds opened a crack and the grey morning light woke him. He made himself a small cup of coffee on the stovetop instead of the machine. He sprinkled nutmeg in it and nothing else. He wore an Aran jumper with wooden buttons and royal blue jeans. He popped his head in the room with the twin beds and saw Natalie asleep there. Shake let her sleep and went fishing in the fog.

Natalie was sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs on the dock by the time he got back.

She helped him tie the boat down and he wavered getting out.

“Catch anything?”

“I caught everything, but I let ‘em all go.”

They sat on the dock all day. The leafy trees turned into pockets of yellow in all the dark green forest pines. Ducks were leaving by the dozen, quacking as they flew. Shake flicked his cap back on his bald, white head.

“Have you called her yet?” he asked.

“No.”

“It would’ve been a good morning for it,” he said.

“Did you feel the water? Is it cold?” she said.

“Colder and colder.”

The next morning Shake braced himself against the trees on his way down the steep walk to the dock. He heard a splash and stayed by the trees to watch. Natalie was swimming in the fog. He could just make out her smoky shape moving through the water like a little girl hiding behind sheer curtains.

It was freezing and Natalie blew water away from her mouth as she swam. Three inches of clear air pushed against the surface of the water, below the fog. In that buffer zone Natalie was absolutely alone. She swam around and then climbed out onto the dock. She shivered there, her toes gripping around the edge. Her whole body shook and she gritted her teeth and cracked her knuckles into fists. It was quiet. Then Natalie screamed. The scream echoed back and forth and she cried listening to it.

Shake came out from the woods and stepped over all her clothes in a pile. There was no towel. He draped his sweater over her and said, "It's all right." He built her a fire and swaddled her in the heavy blanket with all the patches and kissed her on the temple. "Everything will be all right," he told her, hoping, uncertain.



THE WET SIDE



In the steam and electric hum of beetles sat a house. It was sunburnt and chipped. Its windows often locked up and the spring on the screen door was coiled too tight. A dog barked in the weedy grass. She dug up stones in the worn-down driveway made by the pick-up and a rusted four-cylinder. Flies went after the dog's ears and eyes and she twitched them away. The dog played with a stone out in front of the house. Dropping the stone from her mouth and dancing around until she picked it back up so gently to not break her teeth. The dog stopped and looked out into the trees. Her mouth and black lips were slick and her face appeared to smile as she panted and listened. Her tail, a fan of long hairs brown as copper, darted around. Her master watched her from the porch. He drank iced tea out of a tall, thin glass that dripped onto his abused white tee-shirt. He sat in a chair and put the glass onto the pedestal table beside him. His name was Daniel. It was Florida. It was August.

Daniel wiped his face with his hands and rubbed them off against his oily jeans. He did not smoke. He never picked it up as everyone around him had and some nights when he'd lie there, watching his wife Brenda pull on her cigarettes, he'd wonder why. He wondered why some vices took him while others did not. He would hold out his hand and Brenda would place her cigarette between two fingers. He would drag on it, hold, and blow out. After, he always shrugged. "I don't quite get it," he'd say and Brenda would smile and go on smoking it down to a little soggy butt. He sat there, not smoking, drinking his iced tea, when his dog barked and skipped down the driveway. Daniel waited where he was.

A sea foam green station wagon with old suspension creaked up the driveway. The dog yapped alongside it. It parked next to the pick-up and Gracey got out. Her round body sat atop long, thin legs like a swamp bird. She pushed down the dog and, after getting a good whiff, the dog went back to what she had been doing. Daniel got up from his chair and rubbed his nose to hide his smile like he liked to do.

“Look at you,” she said. “Mr. Handsome.”

Daniel stepped off the porch and hugged Gracey. She was four inches shorter than Daniel and strands of her platinum hair got stuck to his graying scruff. Daniel pulled away and wiped the hair gone. He offered her the porch with an outstretched hand. They sat.

“Have you talked to Junior?” Gracey asked.

Very quickly Daniel lost the smile he had tried to hide. “No. He keeps calling here. I don’t pick up.” He took a drink from the sweating iced tea.

“What do you got there?” Gracey nodded her head at the glass.

“Iced tea. Would you like some?”

“Anything special in it?”

Daniel shook his head. “No, there’s nothing special in it.”

“Is it fresh brewed at least?”

“Brenda made it this morning. Here,” he said getting up, “let me get you some.”

Daniel pushed himself onto his boots and went into the house. Gracey stood to get a pack of cigarettes out of her back pocket. The pack was crushed but the cigarette only needed a little straightening. She lit it and puffed on it. Gracey got smoke in her eyes and

they began to redden while she watched the dog drink from a metal bucket beneath the garden spigot. Drool slipped off her face when she took breaks to breathe.

“Where is Brenda?” Gracey asked loud enough for Daniel to hear inside.

“At the hospital with her mother,” Daniel answered.

“Not sick again?”

Daniel came back onto the porch with a full glass. “Yep.”

Gracey took the glass and had a sip before placing it on the table next to where she had been sitting. She smoked.

“Why don’t you pick up?” she wanted to know.

“Hm?”

“Why don’t you pick up when Junior calls?”

“Oh, Jesus, Gracey.”

“Come on, why not?”

“Cause I know exactly what he’s gonna say. He says the same thing every time he calls. Same exact shit.”

“When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Not sure. A while ago.”

“How long?”

“Four months. Something like four months.”

Gracey nodded. She smoked. “He just got back into town.”

“Oh yeah? Where from?”

“They caught him out driving again. Shipped him up to Sterling to dry out. He just got back into town yesterday.”

“Sterling?” Daniel leaned against the post holding up the porch’s roof. “I hear they don’t even let you smoke in Sterling.”

“That’s what he said.”

“Maybe it’s good. Maybe he’ll quit for good now.”

Gracey smiled and shook her head. Daniel looked on with his eyebrows upturned. They didn’t make eye contact.

“I’m on my way over to see him. Figured I should stop by. Figured maybe you’d come along.”

“I don’t think so.”

“He wants to see you. He told me. He said he misses you.”

“Yeah, well, he keeps calling here and I keep letting it ring.”

Gracey flicked her cigarette out to the dirt driveway. “You could pick up the goddamn thing. He is your friend for Christ’s sake.”

“He’s just gonna say, ‘Come on over and have a couple beers with me,’ and then I’ll be stuck driving him all over town, running errands, going to bars, paying his fucking tabs. I’m sick of it.”

“He ain’t got a car—“

“And whose fault is that?”

“—He needs help. He’s been up in Sterling for nearly a month and could use a friend right now. And you don’t have to drink, Daniel. It’s not like we tie you up and pour the shit down your throat.”

“Don’t give me that. I know how it’ll all play out just fine.”

Gracey messed around with her empty pack, trying to find a hidden cigarette by going at it at different angles. Daniel picked the peeling paint on the post. The dog barked. She hopped into the grass face first.

“What’s it doing out there?” asked Gracey, watching the dog.

“She’s just going after something,” Daniel said.

“Something?”

“Yeah. A mole or something. There, look, she’s got it.”

The dog thrashed her head and went prancing away with something small, dark, and limp between her teeth.

“What does she do with it? Does she eat it?”

“I think she buries them somewhere. I don’t really know.”

Beetles hummed. Flies swooped in and then disappeared. There was a breeze somewhere in the trees that couldn’t get out to touch anyone.

“A month he was up there?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah, just about. I guess he got pulled out of his truck and shipped up there without even a change of clothes. He’ll need one of those breathing apparatuses to drive his truck when he gets it back.”

“If he gets it back. Who got him? Darryl?”

“Oh, God, no. Not Darryl,” she laughed. “Some rookie from the sheriff’s department. On the third of July, too, if you can believe that. Shipped off to spend the fourth on the dry side.”

Daniel laughed. “He must’ve been pissed.”

Gracey laughed too, harder. She said, “You should’ve heard him when he called.”

He could picture it and they laughed together out on the porch. They sounded younger when they laughed, and, for an instant, felt it. Gracey finished off her laugh with a hearty cough.

“If he’s been gone a month he’ll need some food. Let me grab a few things for you to bring along,” Daniel said.

He shrugged off the post and swiped up his nearly empty glass as he went inside. The sun had dropped some, and the sky behind the house faded. Gracey slapped at a mosquito on her calf. She rubbed the spot. Her legs were no less flawless. They were smooth and uniform in color. As if all her youth had drained into them and remained.

Daniel came back carrying a grocery bag filled with cans of tomato soup, a loaf of bread, and a pack of cheese. “Here,” he said.

“You bring it.”

“I ain’t going over, Gracey. Now take the bag. Make some grilled cheese and soup for him.”

“I ain’t taking it unless you come along.”

“Gracey...”

“If you give me that bag I’ll feed the goddamn birds with it on my way. Now let’s go already.”

Daniel didn’t move. He just stood with the bag outstretched.

Gracey said, “I’ll drink all his damn beers myself, okay? You don’t have to worry. We won’t leave any for you even if you want one. Come on.”

Daniel let the bag fall to his side. “All right,” he said, grabbing his pick-up keys from the pedestal table. “But I’ll drive. You’re worse than Junior.”

When Daniel shut the pick-up door the dog's ears popped up. She heard its engine turn over and she dashed back to the truck. She barked three times as it backed up and pulled away. Once the truck was gone the dog looked around. She climbed up the porch and smelled the full glass of iced tea sweating on the table. She nearly tipped it with her black snout. A small hint of pink lipstick was left on the rim. The sun fell further. The dog grew sleepy.



At night the house could barely be seen, except the one window glowing yellow. The bugs often dove into the screen there and attached themselves. A spider built a web in a corner and grew fat with flies and moths. The spider had a litter and they all ate small spider portions out of the flies. The dog lay asleep on the porch until headlights reaching up the driveway woke her. The pick-up pulled between Gracey and Brenda's cars and shut down. The dog got on her feet, barked once, and then curled back down.

Daniel and Gracey exited his pick-up, letting out a thick foamy laugh. Brenda came out, letting the screen door slap shut behind her. She wore a loose tank-top with no bra and running shorts. Leaning against the doorframe, she crossed her arms over her chest to cover up a bit. Daniel and Gracey swayed slightly where they stood. The dog's ears perked up with every sound.

"Hey there, Gracey," Brenda said, wearing her fake smile. "Saw your car when I got home and figured he was with you."

"Hello, honey," Daniel said.

"Junior just got back into town and I came by to see if Danny wanted to see him," Gracey explained.

“Junior?” Brenda looked to Daniel with her raised eyebrows. “Oh, that’s fine then.”

“Listen, honey—”

“Shut up,” Brenda snapped. Slowly, she turned to Gracey and said, “Perhaps it’s time to go home now.”

“Honey, she’s drunk. She can’t drive.”

“But you can?”

“Hey, it’s fine. It’s fine. I’m leaving,” Gracey said.

She walked to her car and got it going. Headlights splashed across the house and Daniel and Brenda as she turned the station wagon around. Daniel watched the car with his flushed face and watery eyes. Once the tail lights were gone Daniel said, “I can’t believe you.”

“Me?” Brenda laughed. “You can’t believe me?”

“She could get killed out there.”

“Don’t be such a fucking hypocrite.”

“You don’t need to swear at me for Christ’s sake. I’ve been good. No, I’ve been damn good. I haven’t slipped up in months.”

“Is this your reward for such damn good behavior?”

Daniel stepped on the porch and tried to squeeze by her, into the house.

“I’m going to bed,” he said.

“Like hell. You sleep outside.”

Brenda gave Daniel a shove. His balance was shot and he stumbled off the porch. She shut the door and locked it. Daniel made it back to the door and knocked softly.

“I’m sorry, honey. Let me in. I just want to go to bed.”

Through the door Brenda said, “You stink like beer and piss. Fuck off.”

Daniel knocked on the door harder, then frantically.

“Brenda?” he said. “Goddammit, I’ll just go through a window.”

“Fuck off, Daniel, you’re staying outside.”

Daniel got off the porch and watched Brenda go to each window, shut it, and then draw the blinds closed. Daniel followed her around to the bedroom window. Brenda tugged on it with her fingertips and it didn’t budge.

“That one always sticks,” Daniel told her, standing on the other side of the screen.

Brenda tried again, putting all her weight against the window. She grunted.

“Okay, okay,” Daniel said, “I ain’t coming in the house. Take it easy. You’re going to roast in there with all the windows shut like that.”

“You ain’t coming in?”

“I ain’t.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

The window stayed open. Daniel put his back against the house and lowered himself beneath the window so he was sitting in the grass like an Indian. Through the window, on the other side, was the head of his bed. Brenda lay on top of the sheets staring at the ceiling. The dog found Daniel sitting there and planted herself next to him so that her head fell in Daniel’s lap. Daniel stroked the fur between her ears.

He said, “Honey?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sobering up, are we?”

“I’m sorry.”

Brenda rolled over to face the empty side. “I’m tired,” she said. “I’ve had a long day, okay?”

“How’s your mom?”

Brenda clenched her fists around the sheets and tightened her eyes. It took her moments before she said, “Fine.” A tear slipped out of her eye and rolled across her nose. It dripped, darkening her pillow. “She’s fine.”

“That’s good,” Daniel said, nodding to the dog, petting her. “I’m glad.”

Thousands of crickets spoke to one another. Daniel’s truck still ticked in the driveway. A million crickets. Brenda.

